

*The Italian Neo-avant-garde:
Between the Historical Avant-garde and Postmodernism*

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I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and that it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed

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To mum, dad, Patrizia and Chris.
With love and gratitude.

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Title of the thesis: The Italian Neo-avant-garde: Between the Historical Avant-garde and Postmodernism.

Abstract

The present work posits the phenomenon of the Italian neo-avant-garde in the wider cultural dynamics of Modernism, Avant-garde Art and Post-modernism. It argues that the Italian neo-avant-garde's understanding and expression of the social value of formalized language and literariness is to be closely related to Modernist and avant-garde cultural dynamics, and not to a post-modernist regime of cultural values.

Chapter one presents the Italian neo-avant-garde as a phenomenon to be posited within the scenario of the changing role of the humanist intellectual in '50s and '60s Italy. Avant-garde art as a notion and tradition is tackled through Peter Bürger and Pierre Bourdieu's theorizations that are consistently referred to, criticized and used, throughout the study.

Chapter two focuses on the problems posed by Italian Futurism to any idealistic notion of avant-garde art as good political praxis. It also explores the rhetorical codifications of the avant-garde's self-mythologizing discursive practices through the analysis of the Futurists' use and appropriation of the genre of the manifesto. The relationship between theoretical discourse and the sense of an end, or epochal crisis, constituting the Futurist manifesto, is here envisaged as an aspect that is a precursor of the proliferation of theoretical discourse referred to as 'post-modernism'.

Chapter three analyses the neo-avant-garde's corpus of theoretical writing and shows that, despite the fact that they did not write a manifesto proper, the rhetorical codifications of the avant-garde's self-mythologizing discourse are still present in their individually written

texts. The chapter also focuses on the neo-avant-garde's reception of Futurism and on the similarities and differences between the two movements.

Chapter four posits the Italian neo-avant-garde within the broader framework of the historical avant-garde while highlighting their use of and relationship with science and scientific discourse, especially in Umberto Eco's works. It also carries out a comparison between Eco's modernist understanding of 'form' and literariness and Leslie Fiedler's 'American Post-modernism'.

Chapter five concludes the work with a lengthy analysis of the use of the montage in the poetical works of the *Novissimi* poets Edoardo Sanguineti, Elio Pagliarani, Nanni Balestrini, Alfredo Giuliani and Antonio Porta. Moreover, it carries out a critical comparison between the discursive, ideology-oriented and anti-hedonistic use of *montaged* linguistic material characterizing the *Novissimi's* experimentalism and the iconic use of language characterizing the multimediatric experiments of *poesia totale*, concrete poetry and technological poetry.

The conclusion highlights the modalities, or in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, the *distinction marks*, by which the Italian neo-avant-garde challenge, appropriate, change and finally *perform* the practice of avant-garde art as truly innovative art.

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Introduction and Preliminary Considerations

The long span of time (1956-1969) along which the trajectory of the Italian neo-avant-garde unfolds, the interaction between changing conditions within and without the literary field, and the avant-garde logic of overtaking, formal overcoming and continuous creation of the new, gives rise to a series of internal contradictions within the movement's overall project. The neo-avant-garde's 'programme' is fraught with tensions and conflicts between two seemingly diverging concepts and projects: on the one hand, a formalist, self-referential and metalinguistic stance theorizing the equivalence between social and discursive order, purporting and legitimizing the priority of literature over ideology and direct political practice; and, on the other hand, an avant-gardist stance aimed at forcing literature beyond its inevitable limits, critically engaging with the problem of its commodification and theorizing on the political power of language and form.

Between 1967 and 1969 the group becomes fully oppositional avant-garde and invests its cultural capital into the analysis and support of the '68 students' movements in the pages of the short-lived political fortnightly *Quindici*. The abandonment of the supremacy of literature and literariness in favour of the espousal of political practice in *Quindici*, exacerbates the aporias inherent in the group's project: on the one hand, although within a very different set of problems with respect to the post-war period, it brings back a rethinking of the issue of political engagement on the rejection of which the neo-avant-garde had based its artistic activity, formal reasons and ideology; on the other hand, it marks the exhaustion of their envisaging of language as an oppositional 'Other' resisting commodification by means of the negation of the communicative function. The very folding of *Quindici* brings to the

open the untenability of the neo-avant-garde's ideological compromise between a formalist stance and an avant-gardist, New Leftist one. In this respect, the neo-avant-garde rehearses, within its own scope and limits, the collapse in relationships between the ideological Left and literary culture in the field of literary-intellectual élite between the 1940s and 1968.¹

Some critics have dispensed with the concept of the 'avant-garde' and argued that the neo-avant-garde is an early manifestation of 'Italian postmodernity.'² This argument is implicitly distrustful of the flourishing of the neo-avant-garde movements in the 60s and sees them as an opportunistic 'repetition' of the historical avant-garde yet devoid of the political utopianism of the former. I suggest that it is still useful to engage with the notion of the avant-garde as a working hypothesis for the following reasons. The social and cultural differences between 50s and 60s Italy and the USA, the geo-political area in which postmodernism, as a term and concept, was first proposed, are gaping. According to Andreas Huyssen,

the term postmodernism accrued its emphatic connotations in the United States, not in Europe where it could not have been invented at the time. In France, the 1960's witnessed a return to modernism rather than a step beyond it. In Germany, given the context of post-war reconstruction, neither the variations on modernism of the 1950's nor the struggle of the 1960's for alternative democratic and socialist cultural traditions could have possibly been construed as *post-modern*.³

The field of the cultural élite in 1950s and 1960s in Italy bears hardly any resemblance to the post-modernist rhythm of aesthetic production where the dynamic of change is so sclerotic

¹ Cf. R. S. C. Gordon, 'A Neo-rationalist Tendency in the Field of the Literary Intellectual in 1970s Italy: Vittorini, Sciascia, Ginzburg'.

² Cf. Alfonso Berardinelli's position: M. Ganeri, 'Il paradosso critico. Intervista a Alfonso Berardinelli'.

³ A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide, Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, p. 191.

and remarkably fast as to have lost its capacity for shock. Also, the post-modernist American scenario of a deep de-politicization of both society and cultural élite bears quite a few differences with the Italian counterpart. Throughout the late 60s and the late 70s, Italian society has shown a peculiarly high degree of politicization leading to what has been defined as the phenomenon of the '77 'mass-avant-garde.'⁴

The Italian neo-avant-garde's envisaging of the kinetic potentials of language as a means to act upon the reader's "vitalità",⁵ (vitality) presents a few similarities with the historical avant-garde that should be investigated. In the historical avant-garde, the *en avant* and continuous creation of the new is conflictually sustained by the irresolvable contradiction between the utopian envisaging of what is not yet there in a broader social sense, and the strain of the market-place pushing artists ahead to create *new* styles and unheard of artistic forms. To put it otherwise, the historical avant-garde also was fully embedded in the then-nascent culture industry and to measure the 'bad faith' of the neo-avant-garde against the ideological intentions and the material purity of the historical one means to base one's own judgment on a nostalgic idealization of the former.

On the other hand, the Italian neo-avant-garde does coincide with the emerging of some of the social traits and cultural values associated with the organization of culture in 'postmodern' societies, that is to say, the expansion of the media and culture industry, the school reform leading to the 'scolarizzazione di massa' (1962), the subsequent loss of prestige of intellectuals caused by the repetition and recycling of intellectual work by the culture and media industry and what is loosely defined as the 'Americanisation' of the Italian

⁴ Cf. R. Lumley, *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978*; M. Calvesi, *Avanguardia di massa*; K. Gruber, *L'avanguardia inaudita. Comunicazione e strategia nei movimenti degli anni Sessanta*.

⁵ A. Giuliani, 'Introduzione' to *I novissimi. Poesie per gli anni sessanta*, p. xiii.

way of life. Many members of the neo-avant-garde were working for the 'culture industry', and their literary production was absorbed into academia at a very early stage. And yet, far from being based on a cynical postmodernist acceptance of the commodity status of literature, their literary and theoretical production aimed at subverting and criticising the aesthetic structures of the ready-for-consumption culture fostered by the media, the best-sellers and the by then exhausted neo-realistic aesthetics. They engaged with the representation of reality fostered by the mass media and other out-of-date literary styles and tried to show its false neutrality by means of a critical theorization of the relationship between ideology and language.

Their 'formalist' idea of literariness and literary language was intrinsically oppositional, and thus 'political,' with respect to the culture industry's logic of easy consumption that they associated with the extant capitalist 'bourgeois' ideological and discursive order. Because of their identifying literature as an oppositional 'Other' with the moral task of being critical against the effects of commodity culture by means of its potentially alienating distorted structures, they never managed to envisage an aesthetics in a postmodernist sense by moving beyond an *elitist* literary practice sanctioning the hierarchy between 'high' culture and 'mass' culture. In this respect, the scientific and specialist slant of their 'avant-gardist leftist-modernist' aesthetics can be seen as a defensive, not necessarily conscious, strategy against the perceived devaluation and loss of prestige of the humanist intellectual caused by the culture industry and the nascent 'mass' society.

Indeed, as an object of study, the neo-avant-garde presents the researcher with a multifaceted cluster of problems and a vast corpus of writing of both primary and secondary sources, hence the necessity of focusing on one aspect.

The present work tries to posit the neo-avant-garde's use of poetic and theoretical discourse within wider cultural dynamics, i. e. the complex interaction between 'high' culture on the one side, and popular and 'mass' culture on the other.⁶ More than being analyzed on an aesthetic ground, the characteristics of *poesia novissima* and the notion of the 'open work' are seen as part of the neo-avant-garde's wider discourse on culture, as a re-elaboration, on a discursive level, of the social and political context in which their activity as literary intellectuals was rooted. From this point of view, the present study is an attempt to analyze the 'high' culture literary event through the use of cultural theory.⁷

Methodological Considerations

The present study aims to provide a theoretical understanding of the Italian neo-avant-garde in relation to the following concepts: avant-garde, modernism and postmodernism. In the course of the present study I try to explain and elaborate my use of these concepts as much as possible – indeed, any consideration on the 'modernism,' or 'postmodernism' of the Italian neo-avant-garde implies given theoretical assumptions. These have to be made explicit and constantly clarified.

I maintain that the Italian neo-avant-garde is an expression of modernity, that they articulate a modernist discourse and, so to speak, a modernist aesthetic fantasy of self-

⁶ For the meaning of the terms 'popolare' and 'di massa' within the Italian cultural framework see Z. G. Baranski and R. Lumley, 'Turbulent Transitions: An Introduction', in Z. G. Baranski and R. Lumley (eds.), *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy: Essays on Mass and Popular Culture*, especially pp. 10-12.

⁷ This study would like to be seen as a partial contribution to the lively debate on Italian Cultural Studies; cf. D. Forgacs and R. Lumley, *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*; and also Z. G. Baranski and R. West (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Italian Culture*.

definition through a clear distinction from mass culture, a realm construed as a degraded and illegitimate imaginary other. By this I mean that they articulate and enact

the modernist fantasy of self-definition through opposition to a degraded mass culture [that, in post-modernist conditions] has become obsolete, and indeed has been replaced by rather different practices of fusion or play between high and low genre and traditions. [Within post-modernist conditions] The principle that founds the modernist ethos, the critique of the cliché, has itself become difficult to sustain, and has in any case been called into question by new modes of relation and repetition.⁸

By 'postmodern', I mean an attitude towards cultural forms that is insouciant of problems of cultural legitimization and that rejects the cultural authority sanctioning both a hierarchic organization of culture and the viability of the distinction between 'high' art and 'lower' forms of popular culture.

In this work I will at time use the terms 'avant-garde' and 'modernism' interchangeably. This is the result of my attempt to problematize the myth of the avant-garde as a form of good political praxis. I maintain that it is not possible to make a clear-cut distinction between modernist and avant-garde practice based on the grounds of the latter's destabilization of the hierarchy between the 'high' and the 'low'. It could be refreshing to think of the issue of the Italian neo-avant-garde's 'abbassamento' within the specific frame provided by some developments in the Anglophone theoretical debate. According to Andreas Huyssen, the destabilization of the relationship between a high literary practice and lower forms of popular culture is the feature shared by both avant-garde art and post-modernist aesthetics: "despite its ultimate and perhaps inevitable failure, the historical avant-garde aimed at developing an alternative relationship between high art and mass culture and thus

⁸ J. Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, pp. 25-6.

should be distinguished from modernism, which for the most part insisted on the inherent hostility between high and low”.⁹ Accordingly, the artist’s appropriation of ‘lower’ forms of popular culture also expresses a ‘democratic’ instance finally sanctioning the cultural dignity and legitimacy of forms of everyday culture. The argument of the radical difference between avant-garde and modernism based on the avant-garde’s iconoclastic destabilization of the relationship between high art and popular forms of culture present problems though: it seems to displace the myth of the avant-garde’s progressive utopianism from the level of political praxis to the level of cultural praxis. Moreover, it seems to miss the criticism and irony that is implicit in the avant-garde artist’s appropriation and use – within the terms of his or her aesthetics – of ‘lower’ forms of culture.

Montage seems to be a case in point. The technique of montage is synonymous with avant-garde iconoclasm: Tristan Tzara’s recipe for ‘writing’ a Dadaist poem consists in cutting a newspaper article into pieces with scissors, mixing up the pieces of paper and, finally, assembling some randomly selected fragments into a new continuum. The Dadaists’ iconoclasm destabilizes the relationship between the ‘high’ and the ‘low’: the appropriation of ‘lower’ everyday linguistic forms is a form of criticism to and delegitimization of literary tradition. Indeed, the avant-garde artist’s relationship with the literary canon is fraught with tensions (arousing from the anxiety about originality). And yet, the avant-garde’s relationship with lower linguistic forms is fraught with contradictions too: the dismembering of the newspapers as daily matter – raw ‘lower’ material acquiring meaning only through the artist’s mental superiority and manipulating action – is an act expressing irony and intellectual disdain (hence Tristan Tzara’s mocking remark that an intelligible work is the product of

⁹ A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, p. viii.

virgin journalists). In this case, appropriation does not imply a systematic validation of the cultural values originally expressed by the appropriated cultural form. What is appropriated does not have a value *per se*: it is an object of practice. My scepticism towards the argument of the Italian neo-avant-garde's 'postmodernism' on the grounds of their 'abbassamento' is a corollary of this last consideration (linguistic 'abbassamento' meant as the use of lower forms of discourse not belonging to literary tradition).

I try to expound these problems in chapter five where I analyze the neo-avant-garde's use of montage. I argue that the *novissimi* poets' appropriation of 'lower' cultural forms – "tv esperanto", journalistic language, verbal clichés and common places – gives rise to an anti-communicative stance where the meaning of the overall poetic operation is produced by formal mechanisms – hence Alfredo Giuliani's "neocontenutismo", i.e. semanticised content. This process of production of meaning actually re-states the hierarchy between formalized language (as high art) on the one hand and, on the other, the degraded language of mass culture, a language that acquires true meaning only through the poet's appropriation: his or her 'manipulation' enacts the mechanisms of a 'high'-cultural code of value.¹⁰ To a certain degree, this is true for 'poesia concreta' too: the appropriation of the techniques of mass communication leads to the critique of the ideology the latter conveys. My discussion of the neo-avant-garde's poetic practice and *novissimi*'s use of montage is not an exercise in exegesis. While deeply respecting and referring to other critics' 'exegetic' works, chapter five proposes itself to elaborate an interpretation the *novissimi*'s use of montage informed by "one of the fundamental theses of work in cultural studies: that no object, no text, no cultural

¹⁰ J. Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, p. 145.

practice has an intrinsic or necessary meaning or value or function; and that meaning, value, and function are always the effect of specific [...] mechanisms of signification.”¹¹

Chapter one provides an account of how the expansion of the ‘culture industry’ challenges the ethical code of intellectual practice in 1950s Italy. Many members of the neo-avant-garde worked for the ‘culture industry’ and the mass communication system: they were both experimental writers and ‘*operatori di cultura*’. Their involvement in the industrial production of cultural goods and consumerist values and in the television production of repeatable programmes (like television spots) challenges the two tenets on which their practice as producers of ‘high art’ is founded: the notion of originality and creativity coming from traditional Romantic aesthetics and the notion of Art as a practice founded on freedom from external economic necessity. My thesis is that it is possible to interpret the phenomenon of the neo-avant-garde as the manifestation of the degree of exasperation literature was enduring because of the complex reorganization, commodification and socialization of culture, and also as a contradictory criticism, on the part of the élite faction, of the young generation of intellectuals that was instrumental in the actualization of that process. The neo-avant-garde’s experimentalism is the result of the process of ‘distinction’ (using Pierre Bourdieu’s term) according to which high art comes to define itself in opposition to its imaginary *other*, a degraded mass culture. In the last section of chapter one I discuss Pierre Bourdieu and Peter Bürger’s interpretations of avant-garde art. I criticize and take distance from Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-garde* because of the non-viability of his idealistic interpretation of avant-garde art. Despite an initial criticism, I consistently make use of and refer to Pierre Bourdieu throughout the present work.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

In chapter two I challenge the myth of the avant-garde as a good political practice and I do so by discussing Italian Futurism. The Futurists' appropriation of a technological capitalist aesthetic disproves Bürger's overall understanding of avant-garde art as a criticism of means-ends rationality. My analysis of the Futurist's use of the genre of the manifesto sheds some doubts also on the avant-garde's claim to conflate 'art' and 'life'. I suggest that to use the idea of such conflation (or the notion of the "self-criticism" of art) as a distinction between the historical avant-garde and modernism is a form of tribute the critic pays to the self-mythologizing rhetoric deployed by the avant-garde's use of the manifesto, and a consequence of the performative function of the genre's apocalyptic vision of history.

In chapter three I analyze some of the neo-avant-garde's corpus of writing and their relationship with Futurism. I suggest that the Italian neo-avant-garde's self-understanding is ingrained in dialectic thought and in the belief in the "inclusive autonomy" of the artefact. The neo-avant-garde's articulation of the aesthetic text is an instance of the ideal of the autonomous work – autonomous with regard to tradition and economic necessity – on which the modernist work is ideally founded. Despite the fact that the neo-avant-garde never wrote a manifesto proper, they make a consistent use of manifesto-like discursive regularities throughout their collective corpus of writing. I argue that their belief in the capacity of the latter to carry out a "semanticised" social oppositionality based on the internalization of the artist's revolt on the aesthetic level (Giuliani's textual "vitality"; Eco's "open work") is an instance of the avant-garde's mythologizing self-perception. The neo-avant-garde transposes the hortatory style of the genre of the manifesto on to the textual mechanisms of the "open work" (or *opera in movimento*).

Chapter four points out the continuities between the Italian neo-avant-garde and its historical counterpart. It does so by discussing Eco's notion of the "open work" and arguing that the neo-avant-garde takes part in the self-defining dynamics of modernism. The chapter confirms Remo Ceserani's suggestion that the neo-avant-garde is an episode of avant-gardist formalism. This thesis is pursued further in chapter five the content of which is described above.

Chapter One: Historical and Theoretical Background

I. The Changing Role of the Humanist Intellectual in 50s and '60s Italy.

The members of the neo-avant-garde belong to the first generation of humanist intellectuals (born in the early 1930s) that is fully integrated in the “culture industry” and thus directly experiences the tangible illusoriness of the claim of the independence of intellectual work and the autonomy of art from the economic sphere. They found themselves in the highly contradictory situation – experienced only to a minimum extent by the previous generation – of being artists, poets and theoreticians with literary formations, curricula and ambitions and, at the same time, functionaries and technicians employed by cultural enterprises and institutions, such as publishers, newspapers, radio, television and also the university.¹² Their avant-garde practice is, on the one hand, a genuine manifestation of the crisis of the traditional role of the intellectual caused by the birth of the modern cultural industry and, on the other, a response to the crisis many left-oriented intellectuals experience in the second half of the '50s.

Only ten per cent of the generation of intellectuals who were born between the end of the eighteenth century and the first decade of the nineteenth century earned a living by practising a profession somehow related to the ‘culture industry’. The great majority, at least seventy per cent, were employed in a school and the remaining twenty per cent could rely on private means.¹³ In the 1950s the perception and practice of intellectual work experiences a major shift: for the first time, the expansion of the culture industry presents the traditional figure of the *letterato* (man of letters) with the possibility of recycling the skills and cultural

¹² Cf. A. Abruzzese, ‘Il letterato nell’era tecnologica’.

¹³ S. Piccone-Stella, *Intellettuuali e capitale nella società italiana del dopoguerra*, p. 17.

capital acquired through a conventional humanist training. Paul Ginsborg points out that, in the rapidly expanding Italy of the early 1960s, certain categories of professional increased both their weight and their well being, and yet

in the absence of social and educational reform, professional jobs in the state sector remained at modest levels. The number of teachers, for instance, did not increase significantly before 1964. The myriad of professional jobs associated with an active welfare state [...] was conspicuously absent in Italy. As a result, large numbers of graduates in the humanities continued to have great difficulty in finding jobs which corresponded to their status.¹⁴

The large numbers of graduates in the humanities show the extent to which the ideal of the aristocratic humanist intellectual was propagated far beyond the social area in which it was historically born;¹⁵ it was part also of the wider socio-economic phenomenon of overproduction of graduates typical of the Italian market. Intellectual unemployment, which had been reduced only during the war years, exploded once again more strongly than ever in the post-war period.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the period 1951-63 was the first, from 1880 onward, in which the unemployment of the graduates was reduced just to begin to rise again in the following year as a consequence of the economic crisis in 1963.¹⁷ In his detailed study, Marzio Barbagli has shown that intellectual unemployment has been a structural problem within the Italian market – leading to both emigration towards other European countries and under qualified employment – since at least 1880. And yet, it was only in the 1960s that what was then perceived as the downward mobility of intellectuals led to an understanding of the overall phenomenon in terms of a ‘massification’ or ‘proletarianisation’ of intellectuals.

¹⁴ P. Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy. Society and Politics 1943-1988*, p. 237.

¹⁵ Cf. S. Piccone-Stella, *Intellettuale e capitale nella società italiana del dopoguerra*.

¹⁶ M. Barbagli, *Educating for Unemployment. Politics, Labor Markets, and the School System – Italy, 1859-1973*, p. 213.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

Various structural changes led to a perceived loss of status and prestige of the carriers of intellectual knowledge in the '60s. David Forgacs singles out four interrelated trends: a shift in occupational patterns resulting in the relative predominance of tertiary (service) sector jobs within the labour market as a whole; an increase in the numbers of people trained to enter the 'intellectual professions' (teachers, doctors, lawyers, journalists, civil servants, etc); a consequent 'overproduction of intellectuals' as a result of the advent of mass post-primary education; and a related 'dequalification' of intellectuals skills. These processes triggered a perceived "downward social mobility reducing intellectuals to the status of salaried employees in the professions and the fast expanding cultural communications industries, to 'intellectual workers' on a par, in certain respects, with other workers".¹⁸

According to Barbagli, the unprecedented absorption of intellectuals into the market in the period 1951-63, arose more from an adjustment provoked by the supply than from the actual need of the economic system:

The data we possess would show [...] a process of premature "tertiarization" of the intellectual labor force [...] by means of which nearly all the laureati and the great majority of diplomati were able to evade the threat of declassamento despite the great difficulties encountered in employment [...] the demand for intellectual labor did not arise only from the exigencies of the economic system, but was at least in part provoked by the supply.¹⁹

What needs to be stressed here, is the discrepancy between the actual material circumstances that allowed for an unprecedented thriving of intellectuals as a social group and the pessimistic terms of the articulation of the (self-)perception of the intellectual generally, and more specifically, of the humanist intellectual or *letterato* (man of letters). The autonomy and freedom from external necessity characterising, at least on an ideal level, the social role of the

¹⁸ D. Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era 1880-1980*, pp. 164-5.

¹⁹ M. Barbagli, *Educating for Unemployment*, p. 220.

intellectual and the articulation of the ethos of intellectual practice, were brutally denied by the new situation. As the Marxist poet and critic Franco Fortini wrote in 1961, “the whole new generation of intellectuals is finding or will find job opportunities within public or private cultural institutions (from the engineer to the writer, from the biologist to the film director) but always as *technicians*: the perspective will not be determined by them. They will have non-power disguised as power.”²⁰

The subordination of the new generation of intellectuals to the production procedures within the means of mass communication such as the nascent television and the fast expanding publishing industry, was perceived by Fortini and the older generation of Left intellectuals as the definitive refutation of the autonomy and prestige upon which the social role of the Gramscian organic intellectual had been theorized. Indeed, the vast process of employment of young “integrated” intellectuals within the means of mass communication was met by the traditional Left with a sense of frustration, disillusionment and further radicalization of its disdainful closure towards the “culture industry” and “mass” culture.

Starting from the 1950s, the figure of the intellectual is reshaped as an integral part of the productive apparatus within the socialisation of culture, in a consumerist sense, carried out by the media and the publishing industry.²¹ Phenomena such as the recycling of intellectual work in the structuring of television programmes, the repetitive broadcasting of cultural products such as television commercials and the fast acceleration of the production of books, have the effect of creating a tangible gap between the ethical code of the intellectuals as a social group still intent upon theorizing the non-productivity, self-management and non-commodification of their own practice on the one hand, and, on the other, their actual instrumentality in the industrial production of cultural goods and consumerist values.

²⁰ F. Fortini, *L'ospite ingrato*, p. 89. I am quoting from D. Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era*, p. 165.

²¹ F. Pinto (ed.), *Intellettuai e tv negli anni '50*, pp. 23-9.

The effects of this new situation upon the literary élite's theorization of its own practice cannot be overestimated, as both the notion of originality and creativity coming from traditional Romantic aesthetics, and the very notion of Art as a practice founded on freedom from external economic necessity, were overtly presented with the problems posed by the commodification of intellectual work and the production in series of cultural goods. In this respect, Francesco Pinto has suggested that the persistence of zones of 'artisanal' work within the Italian film industry and its technological backwardness compared to the American one, has actually had the effect of encouraging a theorization of Italian 'neorealism' as an ideological attempt to avoid the crisis of the social figure of the intellectual and to delay the encounter of artistic practice with the moment of industrial production. According to Pinto, the theorisation of 'neo-realism' as an artistic phenomenon alien to the process of commodification

[...] 'hides' the real process intellectual work undergoes in those years and, by ideologically relaunching this work as an old social role to be defended from the new levels of technical reproduction and cultural socialisation, mystifies the new connotation it takes on at the end of the '50s. In other words, neo-realism does not reflect significantly the 1950s as it attempts to depict as hegemonic what was not actually hegemonic, the corporate defence of its own artisanal work as engagement in favour of the people [...].²²

It is particularly within the production mechanisms of the developing television that the subordination and *parcellizzazione* (fragmentation) of intellectual work definitively denies the autonomy and prestige upon which the function of the organic intellectual, as organizer and

²² "[...] 'nasconde' il processo reale al quale è sottoposto il lavoro intellettuale in quegli anni e che, rilanciando ideologicamente questo lavoro come vecchio ruolo sociale da difendere nei confronti dei nuovi livelli della riproducibilità tecnica e della socializzazione culturale, ne mistifica la qualità nuova assunta alla fine degli anni cinquanta. In altre parole il neorealismo non riesce a essere uno spaccato significativo per gli anni '50 nella misura in cui tenta di far passare per egemonico quello che egemonico non era, per engagement a favore del popolo la difesa corporativa del proprio lavoro artigianale", F. Pinto (ed.), *Intellettuali e tv negli anni '50*, p. 39. My translation.

mediator of consensus by means of a complex re-articulation of class-relationships, was based.

At the end of the '50s, the RAI studios served as a circle of interest, meeting point and occasion for interdisciplinary practice for young intellectuals, partly thanks to the training courses for the selection and formation of young journalists, programmers and managers. These courses were attended by some members of the neo-avant-garde, such as Umberto Eco, Angelo Guglielmi and Furio Colombo and also by the philosopher Gianni Vattimo.²³ Between 1958 and 1959 Eco was working at the RAI studios in Milan where he met Luciano Berio. The two worked on *Omaggio a Joyce*, a didactic radio programme that tried to make experimental serial music accessible by providing the audience with a technical and aesthetic explanation of the operations carried out by Berio. Eco introduced Berio to the *Novissimi* group and hence Edoardo Sanguineti collaborated regularly with Berio.²⁴ Guglielmi's cooperation proved to be more than coincidental and bore consequences in Italian everyday life and culture. He started working for RAI in 1955 and from 1987 to 1994 he became the director of the RAI left-wing third channel (RAI Tre – founded in 1979) which reshaped the scenario of Italian television with Guglielmi's *tv verita* (truth-tv) slant.

The courses for journalists and programmers attended by Eco, Guglielmi and Colombo, were promoted by the then RAI administrator, the Christian Democrat Guala, and reveal the Christian Democrats' clear awareness of – and capability to meet – the necessity of

²³ F. Monteleone, *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia. Un secolo di costume, società e politica*, p. 289.

²⁴ Eco's cooperation with RAI was instrumental in his conceiving of the cluster of aesthetic and communication problems that eventually led to the writing of *Opera aperta*. Eco had the initial idea for the collage of texts (from Joyce, Proust and Brecht, among others) that Berio set in 1961 in *Epifanie*, one of his early international successes, Sanguineti wrote the text for the hugely influential *Laborintus II* four years later. Also In 1955, in Milan, Maderna and Berio founded the *Studio di fonologia musicale*, aiming to expand the field of sound exploration. They were joined by Luigi Nono thus forming a circle of interest around the studio at the R.A.I. (*Radio Audizioni Italiane*)

both updating the means of cultural organization and reshaping the intellectual *cadres* by creating new professions. The Christian Democrats, then in charge of the RAI administration, assented pragmatically to the intellectuals' material dependence upon the cultural industry and the specific technical requirements of its means of communications. They envisaged the intellectual not only within an abstract world of ideas to be propagated but also as subjects to be formed and trained to exploit the opportunity brought about by the television to oppose the traditional influence of the Left upon the cinema on the one hand, and, on the other, to "interpret the masses' aspirations and cultural demand [...] by using television's] educating and orientating function. Television [...] immediately appeared [to the Christian Democrats] as a fundamental means for social intervention, a unique opportunity for the modernization of culture in an anti-secularising sense."²⁵

And yet, the Christian Democrats' firm belief in the pedagogic function of television and in the social controllability of the message reflected a still traditional and organic conception of Italian society in which the intellectual was to act as a mediator of ideas and values. Their exaggeration of the potentials of the means of mass communications and of the social control of the message itself, proved to be a fatal mistake both in the short run, as early as in 1951-2, when they lost the local elections, and in the long run, with the slow and yet unstoppable penetration of capitalist and materialist values within Italian society.

²⁵ "interpretare le aspirazioni e la domanda culturale delle masse. [...] alla televisione veniva riconosciuta] una indiscussa funzione educativa e di orientamento [...] La televisione, per la forza stessa della sua attrattiva, appariva subito come lo strumento fondamentale di intervento sociale, un'occasione irripetibile di modernizzazione della cultura in senso antilaicista." F. Monteleone, *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia. Un secolo di costume, società e politica*, p. 289. My translation.

II. The Neo-Avant-Garde and the 'Culture Industry'.

With the expansion of the publishing industry in the '50s and '60s, the production of books moves from a still mainly 'artisanal' phase to a phase where production is organized in relation to the market's potential for absorption. The acceleration of the rhythm of production exploits, in a first phase, the rise in disposable income caused by the economic boom and, in a second phase, the enlargement of the reading public following the school reform introduced in 1962. As a corollary to the changes in the production and organization of culture, the distribution of literary culture also takes on a new dimension. The success of the paperback series Oscar Mondadori in 1965, well symbolizes the publishers' new aggressive marketing strategies aimed at captivating the ever growing public. The Oscar Mondadori books were distributed and sold in the 'edicole' (newsagents) together with newspapers, comics and glossy magazines, thus bypassing, for the first time, the elite circuit of bookshops. Previous to that, more often than not, books were kept behind the counter and buyers were not free to browse as they had either to ask permission to the bookshop-keeper or ask him to fetch the book they wanted. This brief anecdotal description by Nanni Balestrini ²⁶ of the spatial organization of traditional bookshops in post-war Italy can shed some light on the radical nature of the change in terms of the public's access to literary culture brought about by the Oscar series.

Quite a few of the members of the neo-avant-garde were employed by the publishing industry. Besides collaborating with RAI, in the late '50s Umberto Eco also starts working for the publisher Valentino Bompiani; Nanni Balestrini and Filippini join Giangiacomo Feltrinelli who in a short time will become the publisher of the neo-avant-garde, publish most

²⁶ My interview.

of its significant works and also distribute *Quindici*. Alberto Arbasino writes in the newspaper *Il giorno* and Pagliarani is member of the editorial staff of the newspaper *Avanti!* from 1956 to 1962, while Edoardo Sanguineti, Renato Barilli, Alfredo Giuliani, Fausto Curi and Umberto Eco pursue their academic careers.

Their embeddedness within the institutions representing the very cultural model they were fighting against provoked the sceptical and overt condemnation of their avant-gardist practice and got them the label of “integrated” avant-garde as opposed to the uprooted and anti-social avant-garde of the early twentieth century. As Fabio Gambaro has pointed out,

[t]he more the members of Gruppo 63 show an awareness (thanks to Adorno and Benjamin [...]) of the intellectual’s alienation and of the commodification of art in the society of affluence, the more they integrate themselves, with remarkable pragmatism, in the hierarchical structures of [the] cultural system by dynamically taking part into its evolution.²⁷

Their relationship with the cultural system is thus complex and contradictory. They recklessly exploit the potentials of its structures in order to promote an anti-institutional contestation but they also exacerbate in an extremist way the formal conflictuality of their works by making problematic their communicative function and sabotaging the reader’s understanding. The work’s ‘formal oppositionality’ also reveals their ideological criticism of the tentacular commodifying power of the “culture industry”. Their fight against the cultural system from within, gave rise to “a risky, contradictory and, at times, schizophrenic experience, which is

²⁷ “gli esponenti del Gruppo 63 tanto più mostrano di aver coscienza (grazie soprattutto alle acute riflessioni di Adorno e Benjamin) dell’alienazione dell’intellettuale e della mercificazione dell’arte all’interno della società dei consumi, tanto più, con notevole pragmatismo, essi si integrano nelle strutture gerarchiche del nostro sistema culturale, partecipando dinamicamente alla sua evoluzione.” F. Gambaro, *Invito a conoscere la neoavanguardia*, pp. 119-20. My translation.

clearly confirmed by many of their works”²⁸ and also gave ground to moral condemnations of inconsistency and sheer opportunism. And yet, Gambaro points out that

it is necessary though to wonder to what extent the young and impatient members of the neo-avant-garde were used by the culture industry itself: the formal innovation they elaborated was, at least in part functional to the expansion and transformation of [...] the cultural system that was in a phase of development and restructuration concomitantly with the more general process of economic, social and cultural development.²⁹

My thesis is that it is possible to interpret the phenomenon of the neo-avant-garde as the manifestation of the degree of exasperation literature was enduring because of the complex reorganization, commodification and socialization of culture, and also as a contradictory criticism, on the part of the élite faction, of the young generation of intellectuals that was instrumental in the actualization of that process.

II. On the Notion of Avant-garde: Theoretical Background.

For the Marxist critic and poet Franco Fortini, “[t]he unpronounceable avant-garde [was] the other face of the mass prattle. The tight relationship between the neo-avant-garde and capitalist and bourgeois order becomes organic and explicit after being only implicit and indirect in the historical avant-garde”.³⁰ In his ‘Mandato degli scrittori e fine

²⁸ “esperienza rischiosa, contraddittoria e a tratti schizofrenica, come per altro emerge a chiare lettere da molte delle loro opere”, *ibid.*, p. 120. My translation.

²⁹ “è anche necessario domandarsi, quanto al contrario non sia stata l’industria culturale a servirsi delle giovani e impazienti leve della neoavanguardia; nel senso che il fenomeno innovativo della nuova avanguardia è stato, almeno in parte, funzionale all’espansione e alla trasformazione del nostro sistema culturale che era in una fase di sviluppo e di ristrutturazione, in concomitanza con un più generale processo di sviluppo economico, sociale e culturale.” *Ibid.*, p. 121. My translation.

³⁰ “L’avanguardia impronunciabile è l’altra faccia della chiacchiera di massa. La saldatura fra neoavanguardia e ordine borghese-capitalistico diventa organica ed esplicita dopo essere stata, per l’avanguardia storica, solo implicita e indiretta”, F. Fortini, ‘Due avanguardie,’ *Verifica dei poteri*, p. 62. My translation.

dell'antifascismo' (1964-65) Fortini restates that the value of literature as an avant-gardist practice has to be gauged by the level of the writers and intellectuals' social engagement.³¹ By reducing every artistic or literary fact to an act of communication and information and by liquidating thus the problem of political engagement, the neo-avant-garde was reiterating "the fundamental forms of the historical avant-garde [... as] simple expressive means, mere modules at the service of present communication."³² And yet, in the later essay 'Avanguardia e mediazione'³³ (1968) Fortini's distinction between the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde seems to become more nuanced. His rethinking and his willingness to salvage, at least in part, the validity of the linguistic operations of the neoavantgarde, was probably triggered by the radicalization of their oppositional stance leading to the marginalization of literature in the pages of *Quindici* (1967-69).

Fortini envisages a line of continuity between the two phenomena, that is to say, the same attempt to go beyond the impotence of literature at the level of *praxis* by "equalizing every literary operation with action".³⁴ According to Fortini, "to say that the Historical Avant-garde preserved the sacredness of art by the same token denying it, means that the authors of that avant-garde, and particularly the surrealists who, on the one hand, ridiculed the tradition of the demiurge-poet, and on the other hand, continued to demand of their verbal-formal operation a magic efficacy and to identify word with action."³⁵ The "openness" of the works of the neo-avant-garde, "[t]his 'opening' of the work not only to a

³¹ F. Fortini, 'Mandato degli scrittori e fine dell'antifascismo,' *Verifica dei poteri*, passim.

³² "Le forme fondamentali dell'avanguardia storica [... come] semplici strumenti espressivi, meri moduli al servizio dell'espressione e della comunicazione odierna", F. Fortini, 'Due avanguardie,' *Verifica dei poteri*, p. 62. My translation.

³³ F. Fortini, 'Avanguardia e mediazione,' *Verifica dei poteri*.

³⁴ "equiparando ogni operare letterario all'azione", *ibid.*, p. 73. My translation.

³⁵ "L'Avanguardia Storica 'preservava, rinnegandola, la sacralità dell'arte' equivale a dire che gli autori di quella avanguardia, in particolare i surrealisti, mentre per un verso sbeffeggiavano la tradizione del poeta-demiurgo per un altro continuavano a chiedere all'operazione verbale-formale una efficacia magica e ad identificare parola e azione", *ibid.*, pp. 74-5. My translation.

plurality of interpretations, but also to what is other-from-itself, this incompleteness despite its formal conclusion [...] is the precious though contradictory heredity descending from Romanticism to the Avant-garde to us".³⁶ This needs to be valued and safeguarded. And yet, the present capitalist cultural *habitat* – where avant-gardist work is in a state of competition with both other merchandise and other works of art – leaves no margin for the 'revolt' of artists and writers.³⁷ According to Fortini, this is the fundamental difference between the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde, and presents as a corollary the neutralization of the former's attitude of contestation and negation of the extant order. The refusal to accept the "compromise" which actually makes avant-garde work possible, "is the paradox of the Avant-garde – which is integrated without wanting to be integrated."³⁸

'Avant-garde' is a polemic notion signifying a literature that is in opposition against the normally received literary production. As Guido Guglielmi points out, the ideological aspect is an obvious corollary of such an oppositional stance, as "the standards of taste are those that are sanctioned by the bourgeois collectivity and co-opted within a reassuring order that proposes itself as definitive."³⁹ Here, acquiescence to the literary norm, submission to social rules and the commodification of the artefact are three closely related concepts as they are all aspects of the uncritical modality of consumption – on three different levels: aesthetic, social and economic – the avant-gardist work aims at undermining. The notion of aesthetic perception and consumption are expanded to comprise the whole range of social facts and interactions: within an avant-gardist aesthetic practice and social practice are ideally equalized. Ultimately, the ambition of the the avant-gardist work is to be perceived not as an

³⁶ "questo 'aprirsi' di un'opera, non appena ad una pluralità di interpretazioni, ma all'altro-da-sé, questa incompiutezza nonostante la conclusione formale [...] è la preziosa eredità, contraddittoria, che dal Romanticismo scende alle Avanguardie e a noi." *Ibid.*, p. 81. My translation.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁸ "Il paradosso dell'Avanguardia – che è integrata e non vuole esserlo", F. Fortini, *ibid.*, p. 77. My translation.

³⁹ "gli standard del gusto sono quelli sanzionati dalla collettività borghese e cooptati in un ordine rassicurante che si propone come definitivo", G. Guglielmi, *Letteratura come sistema e come funzione*, p. 27. My translation.

aesthetic fact but as a fact pure and simple. The notion of aesthetic perception is pushed beyond the boundaries imposed upon it from without so that the 'artefact' may be apprehended as an object on a par with other social facts. Indeed, the sense of defamiliarization fostered by the avant-gardist work is supposed to change the beholder's encounter with reality and accompany him or her on every level of social activity: the barriers separating art from life are shattered.

The *raison d'être* of the avant-garde is to elude the automatisms of the market-place: "it opposes a critical idea of literature against the ideology of literature fuelled by the market."⁴⁰ By means of a traumatic dissociation between linguistic formal representation and the object of the representation, the avant-gardist work negates the sense of familiarity the beholder may perceive towards the represented object. The collectivity's linguistic rules are sabotaged, deformed and distorted and within it "the word is apparently individual, not social."⁴¹ The work is "an object equipped only with an internal reference"⁴² and refuses to offer itself as "a system of socially authorized meanings."⁴³ Its singularity and unreadability thwarts the possibility of an understanding carried out on the level of the socially accepted linguistic norm which in fact fails to act as a mediator: "By overturning a linguistic act into a practical act, [...] by making life and literature coincide, by burning the semantic nucleus of language", the work is deprived "of all meaning and all internal clarity".⁴⁴ In other words, if the linguistic act is so unfamiliar, strange and difficult that its meaning cannot be understood by means of a reductive juxtaposition with the linguistic acts encompassing the whole of

⁴⁰ "contrappone un'idea critica di letteratura all'ideologia di letteratura alimentata dal mercato", *ibid.*, p. 39. My translation.

⁴¹ "la parola è apparentemente individuale, non sociale", *ibid.*, p. 30. My translation.

⁴² "oggetto fornito solo di una referenza interna", *ibid.*, p. 39. My translation.

⁴³ "sistema di significati socialmente autorizzati", *ibid.* My translation.

⁴⁴ "Rovesciando un atto linguistico in un atto pratico [...] facendo coincidere vita e letteratura, bruciando il nucleo semantico della lingua [...] veramente si toglieva alla poesia ogni sostanza di significato ed ogni chiarezza interna." *Ibid.*, p. 32. My translation.

social praxis, then its appropriation calls for an act that is neither logical nor rational, but practical. And yet,

in reality, the work contains a reference that is external to itself, that is to say, a reference to the language [lingua] which is the medium of its own operation and that acts as a deforming system of signification. The value of the work that measures its [of that deforming language] rational value and liberating power will have to be mediated indirectly by the market and the museum which transfer it to a realm of eternal objects and to the inactuality of the aesthetic dimension.⁴⁵

The 'unreadability' of the avant-gardist work calls for a mediation that keeps alive the work's original contradiction with any exchange value. It is for this reason, Guglielmi argues, that "[t]he sociology of modern art cannot be assimilated with the sociology of reading"⁴⁶ as the community of 'average' readers contemporary to the avant-gardist work does not possess the cultural means necessary for its understanding and appreciation: the work will have to be mediated by the cultural institution (museum, literary, canon etc.) against the boundaries of which it was initially formulated. The mediation of the cultural institution makes the work accessible to a public wider than an exiguous cultural elite – the only fraction of the public contemporary to the work able to comprehend it – and yet, by the same token, the work loses its oppositional meaning and political potential. The very possibility of the museum's mediation and the new immortality the work acquires within it as a 'relic' and as a 'memorial', brings up the question of surpassability and puts the avant-gardist work in the position of being recuperated as a negative (old) model to be surpassed by the market logic it

⁴⁵ "[L'] opera contiene in realtà un riferimento esterno ad essa, appunto alla lingua che è lo strumento della sua operazione e che si è rivelata deformante in quanto sistema di significazione. Il valore dell'opera contiene in realtà un riferimento esterno ad essa, appunto alla lingua che è lo strumento della sua operazione e che si è rivelata deformante in quanto sistema di significazione. Il valore dell'opera che ne misura il valore razionale e il potere liberante, non potrà che non essere indirettamente mediato dal mercato e dal museo che lo trasferisce in un ambito di oggetti eterni e nell'inattualità di una dimensione estetica. Quanto a dire che la contraddizione con il valore di scambio resterà attiva. La sociologia dell'arte moderna non è assimilabile alla sociologia della lettura: l'avanguardia contrappone un'idea critica di lettura all'ideologia di letteratura alimentata dal mercato."

Ibid., p. 39. My translation.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

desperately tries to escape. At the end of this mediating moment constituting the only actual connection between avant-gardist practice and the broader public, the work itself has been neutralized: the utopianism at the origin of the avant-gardist “project” will have to be embodied by new styles and new formal means (that will keep operative the defamiliarizing effect), the ceaseless succession of which uncunningly mirrors the accelerated rhythms of industrial production.

Indeed, the avant-garde’s aprioristic oppositional stance gives rise to many contradictions: its protest claims to be political and to have an effect upon social practice and yet its elitist slant defies understanding; it takes the shape of an elitist practice which can be translated back into the social only by means of a mediating process which takes time and has the effect of neutralizing its power and immediacy as it entails both its recuperation within tradition and its subsumption into the aesthetic norm. At the end of this process, the avant-gardist work will be recuperated also by mass production – as in the case, for instance, of Duchamp’s *Monnalisa with a moustache*.

The *en avant* of the avant-gardist project is marked and conflictually sustained by the aporia between the oppositional and utopian envisaging of what is not there yet in a broader social sense, and the ideology of the *new* which makes avant-gardist works appear more valuable with respect to older and outmoded styles and formal means. And yet, also the formal means expressing the avant-garde’s oppositional utopianism are assimilated and commodified by the logic of the the market-place that puts the various competing artistic ‘schools’ under strain and vertiginously accelerates the creation of new and unheard of styles and forms.

As Hans Magnus Enzensberger has pointed out, “[t]he concept of the avant-garde is, like the word itself, a composite” and also a metaphor.⁴⁷ The preposition *avant* bears a temporal significance and indicates that the “field in which the avant-garde moves is history [...] The *en avant* [...] would, as it were, realize the future in the present, anticipate the course of history.”⁴⁸ And yet, the neutralization of the work carried out by the museum and its ‘eternal survival’ within it, brings about the “prospect that henceforth the march of history can stride across everything without extinguishing it.”⁴⁹ Because of the reduction of the work into a relic, “[e]veryone becomes aware of the process of steady advance, and this awareness, in turn, becomes the motor that accelerates the process.”⁵⁰ By the same token, the iconoclasm of the avant-gardist gesture is nullified and absorbed into tradition. “The arts no longer find protection in their future” as “[f]aster and faster, history devours the works it brings to fruition.”⁵¹ The utopianism of the avant-gardist project, the anticipation of the course of history, is thus doomed right from its inception to surrender to and be coopted by the internal dynamics of the market place and to become futile competition among artistic schools within the economic-world-reversed dynamics of the field of cultural production.

For Enzensberger, there is a fundamental invalidity in “[t]he model according to which the concept of the avant-garde orients itself.”⁵² In fact, it presupposes that “the forward march of the arts through history [proceeds in] a linear, perspicuous, and surveyable movement in which everyone can himself determine his place”, and yet “[n]obody knows what is up front, least of all he who has reached unknown territory.”⁵³ The concept betrays

⁴⁷ H. M. Enzensberger, ‘The Aporias of the Avant-garde’, *The Consciousness Industry. On Literature, Consciousness and the Media*, p. 22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

the promise of a *telos* it implies because, although every avant-garde is militant and contest is its the *raison d'être*, its “promises to burst esthetic and political bonds, throw off established rule, liberate suppressed energies”,⁵⁴ never go beyond the stage of a vitalisatic protest against the extant inertia and fail to be articulated into a clear, outspoken political programme. To put it otherwise, the avant-garde’s relationship with the *vanguard*, that is to say, the social body it is supposed to precede, emancipate and lead towards an unknown and liberated future, is mythological and ideological, not actual: “[f]reedom, gained through revolution, is heralded by all avant-garde movements. It is to this claim, which it does not even express, rather than to its future-orientedness, rather than to its promise to form an elite, that the concept of the avant-garde owes its emotional appeal.”⁵⁵

The cogency of Enzensberger’s argument resides in its scepticism towards the avant-gardist claim to be able to extend the moment of contestation and rupture to the realm of political practice. It is this resistance against a strained dialectic understanding of the concept that enables us to appreciate the tensions triggered by the irresolvable internal contradictions of the avant-gardist project as a whole, that is to say, on the one hand, the ideologically oppositional stance that, although full of implied political potential, never lives up to a comprehensible and straightforward political programme; and, on the other hand, the condemnation and negation of the commodification of art despite the fact that the avant-gardist ideology of the new contradictorily mirrors the accelerated rhythms of cultural production and consumption, and in fact, is functional to them. Enzensberger manages to keep alive the heuristic distinction between these two ideal moments – the politically oppositional moment and the integrated moment – and suggests that this schizophrenic dissociation is the structural contradiction constituting the avant-garde as a cultural

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

phenomenon. The lucidity of this argument can be pushed even further to indicate that any discursive construction of the avant-garde is determined by whichever phase the critic – as a detractor or as an enthusiast – chooses to prioritize.

If one accepts the validity of such an argument, one can say that the construction of the avant-garde carried out by Pierre Bourdieu is based on the conflation of the oppositional moment with the integrated moment. According to the French sociologist, the moment of rupture characterizing avant-garde practice does not represent a radical ideological rupture with regard to bourgeois social practice. Instead, the succession of avant-garde movements, schools and styles rehearsed and practised by the various generations of writers and artists, is a functional moment within the logic putting in motion the dynamics of the field of cultural production, a logic based on the fundamental distinction between avant-garde art, which is autonomous from social practice, and ‘bourgeois’ art, which is heteronomous. For Bourdieu, avant-garde art represents the moment of higher power for writers and intellectuals in the field of cultural production: as a practice, it is based on the distinction between the specific, and therefore autonomous, power which writers and artists possess qua writers and artists on the one hand, and, on the other, the heteronomous power they wield qua experts and artists employed in the culture industry. Within the latter, they exercise a share in domination, but with the status of dominated mandatories, granted to them by the dominant, that is to say, the ‘bourgeoisie.’

The notion of the avant-garde is assimilated to the notions of ‘young generation,’ ‘newcomers,’ ‘challengers,’ and all those writers and artists who are trying to make a name for themselves. Their oppositional stance expresses interest in discontinuity and subversion, an interest which is instrumental in gaining a distinction from, but also recognition by, the ‘vanguard’, that is to say, the established figures of older writers and artists. What is at stake

in the struggle between the new and the old generation is literary or artistic legitimacy in the case of the former, that is, “the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer.”⁵⁶ Avant-garde art is produced within the ‘field of restricted production,’ the area of the cultural field “breaking with the public of non-producers, that is, with the non-intellectual fractions of the dominant class”,⁵⁷ the bourgeoisie. It is addressed only to other writers and artists and, as a practice, it is the most far away from the social and economic constraints, as its products “require other schemes than those already mastered by the ‘cultivated public’”⁵⁸ and by those with an average education. For this reason, avant-gardists “have no contemporaries with whom they exchange recognition (apart from other avant-garde producers), and therefore no audience, except in the future”.⁵⁹

‘Time’ is introduced into the field of cultural production by means of the invention and continuous succession of new styles and new principles: “[t]o introduce [formal] difference is to produce time.”⁶⁰ Distinctive marks such as names of schools and groups, styles and specialities, play a vital role in the struggle for survival of those young writers attempting at making one’s mark as they are all means for “creating a new position, ahead of the position already occupied in the vanguard.”⁶¹

And yet, according to Bourdieu, instead of signalling an actual opposition, the disinterestedness in sales and wordly success of avant-garde art is dependent upon a denial of that bourgeois logic which is actually a precondition for a higher degree of success within the logic of the field of cultural production. The distinction between the two opposing aesthetics,

⁵⁶ P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Literary Production*, p. 42.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

avant-garde art and bourgeois art, is based on two opposing and yet interdependent images of the criteria for success: for bourgeois writers and their readers, immediate public success is intrinsically a guarantee of value, whereas within an avant-gardist logic, the absence and denial of immediate success in sales is the precondition for recognition of the work as valuable, but only in the future. That distinction

helps to disguise the true relationship between the field of cultural production and the field of power, by reproducing the opposition (which does not rule out complementarity) between the dominated and dominant fractions of the dominant class, between cultural power (associated with less economic wealth) and economic and political power (associated with less cultural wealth) [...].⁶²

To put it otherwise, the hierarchy of the field of cultural production is so organized that the logic on which 'higher' success depends is but a complementary reversal of economic logic: the disavowal of the economic disguises an 'interested disinterestedness,' the only means for the artist to gain artistic success.

Bourdieu's analysis highlights to what extent the notion of 'time' and the delayed fruition of the avant-gardist work is strictly related to the gap between avant-garde aesthetics and 'bourgeois' aesthetics which structures all the dynamics occurring within the field. The time intervening between the creation of the work and its public success, is a calculated moment within the economy of cultural production finally rewarding the most daring and autonomous artists. Far from being envisaged as the detrimental cause of the neutralization of the political potential of the avant-gardist work, that intervening time "provides a screen and disguises the profit awaiting the most disinterested investors."⁶³ In other terms, the time allowing the work to relapse into bourgeois practice and to be sold and read as a classic (and thus finally achieve public success), hides the true *raison d'être* of the heralded autonomy of

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

the work, which is actually the only means of transmutation of specific capital into the economic capital guaranteed by a final public success. The limbo in which the avant-gardist work lives and its resistance to exchange value is thus envisaged by Bourdieu as a kind of 'ruse' that assures the artist of a long awaited large scale success.

More than carrying out a demystification of the political claims of the avant-garde, Bourdieu makes them functional and re-integrates them within the sphere of the material interests of artists and writers. And yet, by depriving the avant-garde of its mythologizing self-perception, the notion itself undergoes a substantial impoverishment. Bourdieu's description presents no qualitative differences among the various 'avant-garde' movements following one another since the middle of the nineteenth century. Its sociological slant leaves very little room for analysis of the works themselves: artists and writers seem to have no other interests than in their own career paths and literary reputation building strategies. The lack of ideological insight seems to foster the sclerotic succession of styles and genres literary critics usually envisage within a postmodernist logic.

Peter Bürger focusses his *Theory of the Avant-garde* on the other extremity of the spectrum pointed out by Enzensberger, that is to say, the moment of political opposition. According to Bürger's historicistic account of the avant-garde, the political content the work of art may contain is rendered ineffectual by the autonomy Art has enjoyed in bourgeois society since the nineteenth century with *l'art pour l'art* movement. Since then, art has been released from the demand that it fulfill a social function and has detached itself from the praxis of life. Aesthetics has thus become able to develop as a 'pure' realm separate from the more general experience lived on a daily level. The artist becomes a specialist in the partial sphere of Art, and artistic experience undergoes a marginalization, or 'shrinkage,' as it "can

no longer be translated back into the praxis of life.”⁶⁴ If art were not autonomous, the political content of the work would be effective: “the autonomy status certainly does not preclude the artist’s adoption of a political position,”⁶⁵ but, what it does limit is its chance to be effective.

Avant-garde art represents a violent reaction against the loss of social value Art undergoes as a consequence of the ideological re-organization of all aspects of social life according to a bourgeois logic or *Weltanschauung*. The notion of Art as a specialistic practice and an autonomous realm cut off from social intercourse, developed by Aestheticism, mirrors the bourgeois logic of division of labour and is also instrumental in neutralizing the socio-political potential of the artefact. The revolt of the historical avant-garde at the beginning of the twentieth century is thus the ‘natural’ consequence and a violent reaction against the way Art has been progressively marginalized since the nineteenth century. It represents the moment in History when the artist rebels against the bourgeois logic of division of labour which marginalizes him or her and limits the artist to the practice of the Arts as yet another specialism, that is to say, when the artist lays claim to acting as a ‘legislator’⁶⁶ by means of re-integrating the utopianism of his or her activity into social practice.

The avant-garde represents the moment when art as a separate system enters a stage of self-criticism. By criticizing the autonomy of Art, avant-garde art makes a radical rupture with bourgeois logic: “[t]he intention of the avant-gardist may be defined as the attempt to direct towards the practical the aesthetic experience (which rebels against the [bourgeois] praxis of life).”⁶⁷ In other words, the avant-garde attempts to break the barriers separating art and life by criticizing the concept of art as a separate institution. By ‘institution’ Bürger

⁶⁴ P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 33.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁶⁶ Cf. Z. Bauman in *Legislators and Interpreters. On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals*.

⁶⁷ P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 34.

means “the productive and distributive apparatus and also [...] the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works.”⁶⁸

Bürger’s analysis bears some similarities to Enzensberger’s in that, also for Bürger, Art in bourgeois society lives off the tension between the separateness of its institutional framework and the possible political content of individual works, hence the necessity to preserve and possibly highlight the distinction between the two aspects.⁶⁹ And yet, according to Bürger, the avant-gardist manifestations and ‘happenings’, especially the dadaist ones, actually abolish such a tension by making provocation of the public their only aim and by doing away with the notion of the bourgeois ‘work’ of art and its mode of solitary reception: “The avant-gardistes proposed the sublation of art – sublation in the Hegelian sense of the term: art was not to be simply destroyed, but transferred to the praxis of life where it would be preserved, albeit in a changed form.”⁷⁰ The avant-garde’s ‘sublation’ of art, “which had all the pathos of historical progressiveness on its side”,⁷¹ is the authentic counterpart of the ‘false sublation’ carried out by the culture industry, that is to say, the integration of art into the means-ends rationality of the bourgeois everyday, a false elimination of the distance between art and life. This is the core of Bürger’s thesis and it relies upon a fundamental tenet: Avant-garde art is ‘high’ genuinely critical art as opposed to, and detached from, other forms of popular art – such as pulp fiction – which are commodified aesthetics.⁷² One could say that Bürger’s argument for the avant-garde focusses on the *distinction* between the ‘high’ end of the literary spectrum and the ‘lower’ one while remaining silent on the points of osmosis between the two and, crucially, on the avant-garde’s drawing from and critical appropriation

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶⁹ “If the history of the subsystem ‘art’ is to be constructed, I feel it is necessary to distinguish between art as an institution (which functions according to the principle of autonomy) and the content of individual works.” *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

in the form of parody of lower forms of culture, appropriation formally expressed by the practice of 'montage'.

Bürger's theorization of the critical power of Avant-garde art as a potential stemming from its essential externality with respect to society and its means-ends rationality, reflects Adorno's considerations on the status of the 'critic' as somebody who must refuse any kind of material dependence upon the culture industry in order to keep faith with his or her mission as a moral censor.⁷³ References to the culture industry and its reproduction and distribution apparatuses are scant, and it seems that the necessity for a clearcut distinction between art as an institution and the content of individual works, leading to a focussing on the political potential of the latter, is functional to the unavowed exigency of keeping the avant-garde in a state of purity and freedom from its actual embeddedness in the then nascent culture industry. The historical avant-garde is envisaged as the only authentic moment of rupture with bourgeois Art, a pure, genuine and unique event which is constructed as a moment of ideal and total opposition against – and isolation from – the culture industry. The contradictoriness and failure of the avant-gardist undertaking can thus be evaluated only *a posteriori*, and is not inherent in the notion of the 'avant-garde' itself which is set up as a model of good political praxis. In fact, its purity is confirmed and possibly stressed even more by means of a comparison with the inauthenticity of the neo-avant-garde movements of the '60s: once "the protest of the historical avant-garde against art as an institution is accepted as *art*, the gesture of protest of the neo-avant-garde becomes inauthentic."⁷⁴ And yet, this means, on the one hand, to dismiss the continuity between the two phenomena, that is to say, their depending, although on a different degree, on the mechanisms of the culture industry; and on the other hand, to disregard the fact that the neo-avant-gardes brought to full

⁷³ Cf. T. W. Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', *The Adorno Reader*, *passim*.

⁷⁴ P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 54.

development the contradictions leading to the commodification of the political inherent in the historical avant-garde. Andreas Huyssen has explained the connection between avant-garde, postmodernism and the neo-avant-garde in the following terms: “The earlier avant-garde was confronted with the culture industry in its stage of inception while postmodernism had to face a technologically and economically fully developed media culture which had mastered the high art of integrating, diffusing, and marketing even most serious challenges”⁷⁵ making the “shock of the new” much harder to sustain.

If we go back to Bürger, we see that his theory takes at face value the avant-garde’s unspoken ambition for and claim to political power and compellingly theorizes both its ideologico-historical framework and its ultimate consequences. Nevertheless, his *Theory of the Avant-garde* has been severely criticised for providing no ground for a theorization of the neo-avant-garde movements. One might say that the critiques carried out by Bourdieu and Bürger lie at the two extremities of the spectrum pointed out by Enzensberger. Indeed, they diverge so radically that a comparison might help to highlight their mutual shortcomings. Bourdieu dismisses the importance of ideology and its effects on the practice of art and literature and focusses on rivalries among artists, their relationships with publishers and their reputation building strategies, whereas Bürger idealizes the avant-garde, dismissing the material circumstances in which artists are enmeshed. Also the span of time they take into consideration mirrors the diametrical opposition of their analyses. Bourdieu’s analysis is diachronic in that it focusses on the oppositional dynamics setting in motion competitive strategies among different movements and generations from the middle of the nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, Bürger’s analysis is synchronic: avant-garde art can occur only at a given time in History as a consequential phase

⁷⁵ A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, p. 168.

within the progressive evolution of the subsystem 'Art.' The concept of the avant-garde undergoes a crystallization as it is identified with the movement matching two closely related principles of selection, political engagement and critique of the art institution: accordingly, surrealism not only is *the* avant-garde, it is also the type of avant-garde other movements have to live up to to be defined as an avant-garde.

Bürger's construction of the avant-garde as a cultural phenomenon to be posited within a larger socio-historical framework is still valuable: claims to the 'political' are still a precondition for any artistic movement to be studied and understood under the 'umbrella' concept of the 'avant-garde.' The premises of his theory, that is to say, the envisaging of avant-garde art as an attempt at conflating life and art, could still be viable (it is confirmed by other theories on the avant-garde) but Bürger's theorization of the artist's claim to act as a 'legislator' presents two interrelated problems: a historicist method crystallizing the notion of rupture within the unrepeatable preconditions that can be found only within a past reconstructed in a linear and 'progressive' way; an underestimation of the effects material conditions might have over the ideological reasons leading to the artist's political claims.

There is one other aspect of Bürger's understanding of the avant-garde that needs to be analyzed for clarity's sake lest it become an implicit working assumption: this regards the distinction between avant-garde art and modernist art. The term 'modernism' is here used loosely and stands for high art, formal innovation and technical experimentation. The distinction between avant-garde and modernism provided by Bürger is based on philosophical grounds and is the notion of the "self-criticism" of the sub-system art.

Bürger draws the notion of self-criticism is originally from Marx. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx makes a distinction between two kinds of criticism in relation to the social system 'religion': accordingly, criticism can be either 'system-immanent' criticism or 'self-

criticism'. "System-immanent criticism is characterised by the fact that it functions within a social institution. [...] system-immanent criticism within the institution of religion is criticism of specific religious ideas in the name of other ideas", such as for instance, the "critique Christianity levelled against paganism, or also that of Protestantism against Catholicism."⁷⁶ The emergence of 'new' ideas carrying out system-immanent criticism does not criticize the fundamental rules according to which any given idea within the system can be articulated: 'new' ideas do not question the ideological horizon legitimizing both them and all the ideas struggling for supremacy and allowing for the articulation of *any* given idea within the system. 'Immanent criticism' thrives within the social institution that makes it possible: neither takes distance from it nor criticizes it as an ideological construct that is to be objectified and overcome by means of the final understanding that the very existence of the system is solely determined by the social function it carries out. As a consequence all the various discordant ideas do question one another in their struggle for hegemony *within* the system but do not question the existence of the system 'religion' itself and thus they *all* share a fundamental ideological trait: an unquestioned belief in the necessity of 'religion' as a social institution. By drawing from Marx's distinction and by establishing an equivalence-relationship between 'religion' and 'art' qua social institutions, modernism can be objectified as a form of 'system-immanent' criticism as opposed to the 'self-criticism' of the realm of Art carried out by the historical avant-garde.

To go back to Marx's distinction: "self-criticism presupposes distance from mutually hostile religious ideas. This distance, however, is merely the result of a fundamentally more radical criticism, and that is the criticism of religion as an institution."⁷⁷ In other words,

⁷⁶ P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 21.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

radical 'self-criticism' of a system is a criticism that puts into question the legitimacy of the existence and ideological tenability of the very system that allows for its own articulation.

Futurism may be seen as an instance of such self-criticism: by means of their relentless attack against the 'museum', the Futurists aim at overthrowing Art as a social system within bourgeois society and putting an end to its separateness. The dadaist happening is a manifestation, a performance, and not a traditionally meant work of art. Or again, Bürger argues, "When Duchamp signs mass-produced objects (a urinal, a bottle drier) and sends them to art exhibits, he negates the category of individual production".⁷⁸ Accordingly, "The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is associated with the life praxis of men [...] The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works".⁷⁹

Bürger's distinction is problematic: Futurism took distance from Cubism because the latter failed to represent movement; Vorticism rejected Futurism and it did so by claiming the ability to capture movement in an image. Also, one can argue that the avant-garde aesthetic tries to retain the signature of the artist in a fetishized and saleable mode: the value of Duchamp's *Fountain by R. Mutt* is certainly greater than other urinals of the same series exactly because it is individually signed by the artist.

Conclusion

Many members of the Italian neo-avant-garde take part in two diametrically opposite systems of cultural production. As employed in the mass communication system, tv and radio programmers and journalists, they take part in the production of accessible forms of 'lower'

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

culture while propagating values functional to the growth of the culture industry. Yet this role seems to be categorically denied by an 'antithetic' activity expressing an oppositional stance: as avant-garde experimental writers, they produce highly challenging texts based on an aesthetics of 'anti-communicativeness' and originality.

We have seen that a 'philosophical' understanding of avant-garde art seems to mystify the concept rather than providing a viable explanation of it. To elaborate a 'dialectic' understanding means to participate in the myth of avant-garde art as good political praxis. As we see in chapter three, the Italian neo-avant-garde's self perception and theoretical explanation of their textual practice revolves around such a dialectic understanding. In this, they participate in and are an instance of the avant-garde's self-mythologizing rhetoric. In the next chapter, we first turn to the historical avant-garde and take into consideration the case of Italian Futurism.

Chapter Two: Postmodernism as a Form of Avant-garde

I. The Relevance of Italian Futurism within the Theory of the Avant-garde.

Italian Futurism represents an unsparing conundrum if related to Bürger's explanation of the differences between the avant-garde's revolutionary socialization of culture and art on the one hand and, on the other, the systematic commodification art undergoes within post-modernist conditions. Accordingly, within post-avant-gardist conditions the artefact becomes a pure and simple commodity: its potential to convey to the recipient a socially emancipatory message, a sort of breakthrough in experience, are neutralized by its commodity status. This kind of socialization is defined by Bürger (with a strongly Adornian pessimistic tone) as "false sublation [...] here literature ceases to be an instrument of emancipation and becomes one of subjection".⁸⁰ False sublation as a notion describes, from a philosophical point of view, the praxis initiated by the neo-avant-garde movements of the '60s and is – Bürger argues – diametrically opposed to the praxis of the historical avant-garde. "False sublation" is a philosophical notion providing a negative answer to the following question: if the development of the mass media has reified the sphere of the public realm and if collective reception, as Benjamin argues, is directed by political ends, how can the collective reception of a work still be liberatory and emancipatory?

"Sublation" (*Aufhebung*) is a Hegelian concept: to 'sublate' means to supersede, put an end to, but simultaneously, preserve. For instance, in the history of philosophy, a given idea may be dominant in a certain period. After a time the idea loses its initial significance, or a principle may be found to be false, or the problem may be solved and attention may be

⁸⁰ P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 54.

focussed on a new problem. The idea of sublation is that the old idea or principle is not simply disproved and disposed of; to the contrary, it is contained in the new higher principle that has replaced it. The notion of 'sublation' is used by Bürger in order to explain the philosophical implications of the development of Art during the transition between Aestheticism and the movements of the historical avant-garde. Accordingly, the fundamental principle of *art pour l'art* aesthetics – that is, the autonomy of the work and its ensuing distance from 'life', a distance that expresses Art's criticism of means-ends rationality, and that is the *actual* content of the work – is contained in the new higher principle of the avant-garde's espousal of an action-oriented (reality-oriented) practice. The autonomy principle of Art (Art as an end in itself) is 'sublated' into a reality-oriented, heteronomous practice and yet it still preserves its original criticism of bourgeois rationality. Art's autonomy from means-ends rationality is thus preserved, albeit in a changed form, within the avant-gardistes: "What distinguishes them from [... Aestheticism] is the attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art":⁸¹ hence the sublation, or 'mediated' integration, of the 'autonomy' moment into the 'heteronomy' one. And yet, here, the 'heteronomous' moment – says Bürger – does not include bourgeois rationality: to the contrary, in concordance with the autonomy doctrine that is inherent in Aestheticism and that is based on the rejection of bourgeois rationality, it means a revolutionary socio-political practice aimed at subverting that very rationality.

What has been so far outlined may be summed up as follows: with the historical avant-garde, Art renounces its own autonomy and self-referentiality in order to choose, revolutionarily, to serve a social end: the historical avant-garde finally carries out a practical and action-oriented criticism of the very conditions that, in the first place, gave rise to the

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

necessity of the autonomy doctrine as elaborated by *art pour l'art* movement. The perceived continuity between Aestheticism and the avant-garde is defined as “true sublation”, meaning that art was not to be simply destroyed, but transferred to the praxis of life where it would be preserved, albeit in a changed form. The fundamental point that follows from such a reconstruction is that the criticism of capitalist praxis that is implicit in Aestheticism and *Art pour l'art*, far from disappearing, is ‘sublated’ into the activity of the historical avant-garde.

Such a periodization, however, is unable to account for Italian Futurism. The notion of ‘false sublation’ of art can be traced back to the very beginning of the string of movements making up the historical avant-garde as an overall phenomenon. Italian Futurism is the precursor of a socialization of Art that aspires to actualize itself as a form of social revolution, and yet it claims to do so by unreservedly and enthusiastically articulating and pursuing a total merging of Art as an institution with ‘life’ meant as the social praxis and human experience that is inspired and set in motion by the living flow of capital and technological progress. The Futurist fantasy of the destruction of the boundaries separating Art from ‘life’ – that is the “destruction of the museum,” the institution that synecdochically stands for the totality of sub-system Art – imaginarily propels the artefact along the paths of commodity consumption and disposability. With Futurism, the artefact undergoes an enthusiastic – although only rhetorical – integration within bourgeois means-ends rationality (in Bürger’s terms, it undergoes a “false sublation”).

In the 1909 manifesto, Marinetti puts forward a criticism, condemnation and rebuke of the very logic that puts into motion the dynamics of the field of cultural production: Marinetti’s destruction of the museum represents an uncompromising criticism of the rules sustaining the totality of the institution Art. Marinetti also condemns the absurd fratricide among fellow artists in the name of their quest for artistic legitimization. The museum as an

institution represents the moment of ‘real’ autonomy of Art and offers a compensation, one would say on moral grounds, for the moment of its utmost heteronomy, that is, the market-place. The museum and the (supposedly) priceless aesthetic value the artefact is granted within it, is but the depurated transposition of the antagonism setting in motion the dynamics of the field of cultural production and the artist’s competitive struggle for survival in the face of their dependence upon the market-place’s demand for artistic goods. If the relationship between the market and the museum is envisaged dialectically (as the Italian neo-avant-garde argues; we will see this in the next chapter) and if a criticism of the museum logically entails, and is but a moment of, the criticism of the market-place, then the Futurist rejection of the Art institution should also involve a rejection of what might be loosely defined as means-ends rationality, and so it seems. By producing goods far ahead of the buyer’s expectations and for which there is no real demand yet, the Futurist artist scornfully proclaims his own independence from the market (this is not a Futurist ‘novelty’, however: Picasso waited several years before even attempting to exhibit his *Les Femmes d’Alger* painted in 1907). Futurism’s relationship with the market is complicated further by the fact that the notion of beauty organizing the formal characteristics of the ‘artefact’ that can be neither sold nor exhibited in the museum, far from providing a criticism of, and being detached from, the mechanisms of the market and its relentless production of the new, is a celebration of the accelerated rhythm of technological innovation and the spiral of consumption-patterns it triggers: “We affirm that the world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed [...] a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*.”⁸² The museum is the first victim of Futurist “expansionism”, that is, “the extension of the market, the penetration of capital into spaces hitherto resistant to it.”⁸³

⁸² F. T. Marinetti, ‘The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism, 1909’, in Umbro Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist*

The Futurist criticism of the museum is anti-dialectical: it stems from the artist's yearning to take part actively in means-ends rationality. The shattering of the barriers between the museum and lived experience is carried out by means of the subordination of the aesthetic to the technological. The museum is seen as the receptacle where obsolete artefacts are forever cut off from the ongoing innovation taking place outside. The aesthetic tenets of Realism and Symbolism are rejected as old modes of representation that are unable to express and represent the radical novelty of modern life: their obsolescence epitomizes the incapacity of *all* Art – Cubism included – to register the speed, movement and dynamism brought about by the machine – hence the downgrading of the purely aesthetic fact as inherently 'old' because of its constitutive separateness from lived experience. The newness of Futurist techniques, a newness that is apocalyptically celebrated, draws its legitimization from the very act of relegating those 'old' artistic practices to the museum where all past is demoted, and also from its purported ability to explore the ever-growing expansion of the boundaries delimiting human experience, an expansion that is rendered unlimited by technological progress. The task of the Futurist artist is to delve into and test the new and hitherto unexplored possibilities and the super-human, limitless enlargement provoked by such a change: "We must shake the gates of life, test the bolts and hinges!";⁸⁴ or again: "Let's give ourselves utterly to the Unknown [...]"⁸⁵ Historical and technological progress are equated: the future is romantically mythologized as the time where the manifold possibilities opened

Manifestos, tr. Robert Brain *et al.*, p. 21. "Noi affermiamo che la magnificenza del mondo si è arricchita di una bellezza nuova: la bellezza della velocità. Un automobile da corsa [...] è più bello della *Vittoria di Samotracia*", 'Fondazione e Manifesto del Futurismo', *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, p. 10.

⁸³ P. Nicholls, 'Futurism, Gender, and Theories of Postmodernity', p. 203.

⁸⁴ F. T. Marinetti, 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism, 1909', in Umbro Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos*, tr. Robert Brain *et al.*, p. 20. "Bisognerà scuotere le porte della vita per provarne i cardini e i chiavistelli!", 'Fondazione e Manifesto del Futurismo', *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, p. 8.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*; "Diamoci in pasto all'Ignoto!", 'Fondazione e Manifesto del Futurismo', *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, p. 9.

up by technological progress lead to a physical, almost super-human, relationship between the body and the machine, as Marinetti writes in the 1909 manifesto: "When I came up [...] from under the capsized car, I felt the white-hot iron of joy deliciously pass through my heart".⁸⁶ With the dionysiac fusion of the human body with the machine, the traditional image of human subjectivity as an innately private and 'lyrical' space is cancelled at one metaphysical stroke. As pointed out by Peter Nicholls, "[w]hile the machine embodies a harsh productivist logic, it is one which abolishes the traditional dialectic of private and public, inner and outer, in order to institute a self whose thorough dehumanization is the mark of its triumph"⁸⁷ over innate physical, psychological and 'private' differences, that is, over 'difference' as a positive, progressive, value in itself. Within Marinetti's principle of the 'destruction of the 'I'', the representation of the expansion of technological progress, that is, its penetration and colonization of the self's psychic activity, becomes an aesthetic end in itself that can be reached by means of the fragmentation of the verbal continuum. Marinetti's 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature' (1912) programs the systematic upheaval of syntax as follows:

1. **We must destroy syntax by placing nouns at random as they are born**
2. **We must use the verb in the infinitive [...]**
11. **Destroy the 'I' in literature**, that is, all psychology. Man, utterly ruined by libraries and museums, ruled by fearful logic and wisdom, is of absolutely no more interest. So abolish him in literature, replace him with

⁸⁶ F. T. Marinetti, 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism 1909', in Umbro Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos*, tr. Robert Brian *et al.*, p. 21. "Quando mi sollevai [...] di sotto la macchina capovolta, io mi sentii attraversare il cuore, deliziosamente, dal ferro arroventato della gioia!", 'Fondazione e Manifesto del Futurismo', *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, p. 9.

⁸⁷ P. Nicholls, 'Futurism, Gender, and Theories of Postmodernity', p. 208.

matter, whose essence must be grasped by lashes of intuition, something physicists and chemists can never do.⁸⁸

The counterpart of such an enthusiastic celebration of the future possibilities opened up by technological progress, is the all and sundry condemnation of both the past and the institution of the museum: the two are seen as synonymous. More precisely, the patterns of the 'old' artefact are de-legitimized by the Futurist dogma to "Elevate all attempts at originality, however daring, however violent."⁸⁹ The old artefact is envisaged at best as an outmoded crystallization of an old mode of experience: both of them are rendered anachronistic by the contemporary expansion lived experience constantly undergoes.

Far from arising from a criticism aiming at undermining its actual, and hypocritical, relationship with the market-place, the Futurists' hatred for the museum is provoked by the acknowledgement of its constitutive obsolescence, an acknowledgement that is triggered and emphasized by fast-moving technological innovation: Futurism criticizes Art as a self-referential and autonomous system because of its aloofness and separateness from technological progress; the stage of self-criticism Art enters with Futurism as the first avant-garde movement, is carried out in the attempt to upgrade Art's mimetic possibilities in concordance with the changes brought about by capitalist rationality, that is, the novel modality of human experience determined by technological progress. Marinetti advocates the end of Art as a separate institution and he does so by hailing a new, expanded role for the artist and his activity: hence Marinetti's motto "Artecrazia e artisti al potere" [Power to the

⁸⁸ "1. Bisogna distruggere la sintassi disponendo i sostantivi a caso, come nascono. 2. Si deve usare il verbo all'infinito [...] 11. Distruggere nella letteratura l'«io», cioè tutta la psicologia. L'uomo completamente avariato dalla biblioteca e dal museo, sottoposto a una logica e ad una saggezza spaventose, non offre assolutamente più interesse alcuno. Dunque, dobbiamo abolirlo nella letteratura, e sostituirlo finalmente colla materia [...]". F. T. Marinetti, 'Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista', *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, pp. 46-50.

⁸⁹ U. Boccioni, C. Carrà, L. Russolo, G. Balla, G. Severini, 'Manifesto of the Futurist Painters 1910,' in Umbro Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos*, tr. Robert Brain *et al.*, p. 26.

artist and artecracy]. His encouragement to all artists to glorify the deployment of the machine on a massive scale (“The motorcar is the great inspirer, the one that will give us new rituals, new laws”)⁹⁰ by taking part actively and practically in warfare and imperialism (“The world, the universe, is our [the artists’] keyboard”),⁹¹ is the logical consequence of the desire to suppress the hiatus between art and praxis in the form of a feverish aesthetic celebration of technology.

The separateness of the aesthetic realm is rejected and the unitary conception of the aesthetic fact undergoes a disaggregation on a formal level. The boundaries separating the Art institution from lived experience, are systematically transgressed by the Futurist ‘artefact’, that in fact, in its sustained search for the new and in its attempt to catch up with capitalist praxis, refuses to be perceived as an artefact at all. Futurist ‘novelty’ does not propose itself in terms of the progressive, internal changes occurring within the evolution of the sub-system art, as the degree and extent of the introduction of the non-dialectical – and totally heteronomous with regard to the logic of the realm of Art – notion of technological novelty becomes the yardstick for a positive evaluation of the ‘artefact’ itself. This evaluative moment sees the appropriation, on a linguistic and aesthetic level, of the technological innovation that is actually taking place *outside* the realm of art. Within the poetic genre, graphic signs such as the slash, hyphen, fragmented words and the use of capital blocks disaggregate the poetic verbal continuum: within futurist ‘telegraphic poetry’, the causality, speed and urge of the language of everyday communication become aesthetic ends in themselves.

⁹⁰ “La macchina è la grande ispiratrice, quella che darà i nuovi riti, le nuove leggi”, F. T. Marinetti, ‘Il Futurismo mondiale 1924’, in Luigi Ballerini (ed.) *Gli indomabili*, p. 130. My translation.

⁹¹ “il mondo l’universo è la nostra tastiera”, *Ibid.*, p. 129. My translation.

The Futurists reject the museum and flaunt the absolute novelty of their innovation; it would be rather naïve though to overlook their actual indebtedness to previous artistic practices. For instance, Futurist painters “*adopted* the technique of Cubism and allied them with the findings of multiple-exposure photography. The Futurists felt that Picasso by taking the object apart analytically had failed to experience it in action”.⁹² They studied the motorcar in order to ‘*up-date*’ the cubist line and technique and to be able to portray the essential force-lines of speed. Hence Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, Balla and Severini’s statement that “The gesture we would reproduce on canvas shall no longer be a fixed *moment* in universal dynamism. It shall simply be *dynamic sensation* in itself.”⁹³ Marinetti’s all and sundry rejection of past literary tradition is contradicted by the symbolism of the 1909 Futurist Manifesto. The latter starts with a narrative enacting an initiation rite symbolizing the artist’s absolute self-creation: Marinetti, thrown from his automobile one evening into a factory ditch filled with water, emerges from it, as if it were amniotic fluid, to be born a Futurist. Also, the fragmentation of the verbal continuum and destruction of syntax carried out by the Futurists’ telegraphic *parole in libertà* [words in freedom] has its literary antecedent in Mallarmé’s *Coup de dès* where the grammar, syntax and typographic disposition bring disorder, plurality of meaning and almost entropy.⁹⁴ To stress Futurism’s indebtedness to artistic tradition – and thus, to the museum – entails a deep suspicion of their proclamation of the destruction of the museum: the latter seems confined to rhetoric, the linguistic ‘gesture’ performed by the workings of their 1909 manifesto.

⁹² M. Gill, *Image of the Body*, p. 352. My italics.

⁹³ U. Boccioni, C. Carrà, L. Russolo, G. Balla, G. Severini, ‘Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto 1910’, in Umbro Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos*, tr. Robert Brian *et al.*, p. 27.

⁹⁴ Cf. N. Lorenzini, *Il frammento infinito*.

II. The 1909 Futurist Manifesto.

The 1909 Futurist Manifesto addresses thematically the social status of art in bourgeois society. By programming the destruction of the museum envisaged as a limbo hindering the unlimited potential of both the artist and the artefact, not only does the Futurist Manifesto decree the end of Art as a separate social institution but also, as pointed out by Jochen Schulte-Sasse, it “permit[s] its existence and significance to become visible and perceivable in the first place”:⁹⁵

We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice [...] It is from Italy that we launch this violently upsetting incendiary manifesto of ours. With it, today, we establish *Futurism*, because we want to free this land from its smelly gangrene of professors, archaeologists, *ciceroni*, and antiquarians. For too long has Italy been a dealer in second-hand clothes. We mean to free her from the numberless museums that cover her like so many graveyards. Museums: cemeteries! ... Identical, surely, in the sinister promiscuity of so many bodies unknown to one another. Museums: public dormitories where one lies forever beside hated or unknown beings. Museums: absurd abattoirs of painters and sculptors ferociously slaughtering each other with colour-blows and line-blows, the length of the fought-over walls!⁹⁶

Besides being the leading figure of Italian Futurism, F. T. Marinetti is also the only author of the 1909 Manifesto. And yet, his violence and linguistic antagonism undergo a process of aesthetic and ideological radicalization and exaltation leading to the discursive creation of a fictional unitary subject fracturing the arena of public speech and forcefully claiming a full

⁹⁵ J. Schulte-Sasse, ‘Foreword’ to P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, p. xxxvi.

⁹⁶ F. T. Marinetti, ‘The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism 1909’, in Umbro Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos*, tr. Robert Brian *et al.*, p. 22.

fledged historical agency. Group identity as a collective fiction and imagined community undergoes a uniforming and mythologizing textual process by means of the use of the genre of the manifesto, where the pronoun “we” proposes itself as a historical agent aspiring to a concrete form of cultural work – that is, on a textual level. The main performative effect of Marinetti’s mystifying rhetorical construct is the fragmentation of the arena of public discourse into two opposing factions: this is achieved by means of the repetitive use of the pronoun “we”. The latter represents “not only the nomenclature of a speaking group, but also a rhetorical device to *evoke* audiences, and to mark the distance in ideological ground between those created audiences and their scripted oppressor”⁹⁷ by means of a Manichean semantic and rhetorical opposition to the pronoun “they”. By invoking and exhorting an audience and explicitly asking for its support, the pronoun “we” as the fictional subject of the Futurist manifesto attempts to carry out a function of propaganda and proselytism by interpellating its addressee and by directly soliciting the reader’s unconditional support to the destruction of the museum and the all and sundry rejection of the past:

Do you, then, wish to waste all your best powers in this eternal and futile worship of the past, from which you emerge fatally exhausted, shrunken, beaten down? In truth I tell you that daily visits to museums, libraries, and academies (cemeteries of empty exertion, Calvaries of crucified dreams, registries of aborted beginnings!) are, for artists, as damaging as the prolonged supervision by parents of certain young people drunk with their talent and their ambitious wills. [...] But we want no part of it, the past, we the young and strong *Futurists*! So let them come, the gay incendiaries with charred fingers! Here they are! Here they are! ... Come on! set fire to the library shelves! Turn aside the canals to flood the museums! [...] Take up your pickaxes, your

⁹⁷ J. Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*, pp. 23-4.

axes and hammers and wreck, wreck the venerable cities, pitilessly! [...] Do you have objections? ⁹⁸

As Janet Lyon has pointed out, “the only uniform convention among manifestoes is a particular hortatory rhetorical style”⁹⁹ urging the addressee to take action and put into actual practice what the manifesto only articulates on a discursive level: the manifesto’s direct ‘interpellation’ of its addressee is probably the strongest ‘performative’ feature characterising the genre: all “manifestoes aim for just this kind of figural projection of action.”¹⁰⁰ The Futurists’ revolutionary claim to emancipate art from its state of seclusion and dejection draws its peculiar cogency from the manifesto’s hortatory rhetorical style urging its addressee to act immediately and recklessly. By means of his use of the manifesto as a genre, Marinetti is here creating a world-view that is entirely rhetorical and yet aims at shattering the barriers between the ‘text’ as such and outside reality: by urging the reader’s action and invoking his or her support, the Futurist manifesto promises actualization of the utopian reality it articulates only on a rhetorical level. As an emancipatory discourse, it draws its rhetorical force from its constitutive discourses, which include, among others, the discourses of apocalyptic religious prophecy and millennialism and the martial language of war or siege. All of these discourses are conflated by a reconstruction of History that is peculiar to the genre, that is, a dominant history the oppressive linearity of which is finally disrupted by the rhetorical subject of the manifesto – the “we” that apocalyptically sanctions the end of one kind of history and claims to start an absolutely new beginning: hence the apocalyptic connotations characterising the genre:

⁹⁸ F. T. Marinetti, ‘The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism 1909’, in Umbro Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos*, tr. Robert Brian et al., pp. 23-4.

⁹⁹ J. Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

We stand on the last promontory of the centuries!... Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed. We will glorify war – the world's only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn of woman. [...] And what is there to see in an old picture except the laborious contortions of an artist throwing himself against the barriers that thwart his desire to express his dream completely? ... Admiring an old picture is the same as pouring our sensibility into a funerary urn instead of hurling it far off, in violent spasm of action and creation.¹⁰¹

The discursive coalescence of hortatory revolutionary rhetoric and aesthetic formulations of the pioneering 1909 manifesto of the Futurist movement – shortly to be followed by a string of manifestoes written by other historical avant-garde movements in reaction to that ‘founding’ text – is the consequence of the strong and yet volatile nature of the ideological alignment between the political and the artistic avant-garde that grew out of the late-Nineteenth-century artist's fascination with revolutionary rhetoric. In fact, the rhetorical characteristics by which we can recognize the genre today, that is, its passionate speech-like, rhetorical mode of directness and plain style aimed at exhorting immediate action, underscored the emphasis, during the French Revolution, on transparent communications among citizens, as the intellectual elite then struggling for power equated rhetorical complexity with forms of secretive counterrevolutionary sentiments.¹⁰² Although the manifesto as a genre was originally born within the political sphere as a form legitimating the

¹⁰¹ F. T. Marinetti, ‘The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism 1909’, in Umbro Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos*, tr. Robert Brain *et al.*, pp. 21-3.

¹⁰² Cf. J. Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*, pp. 13-4.

polemical emancipatory voice of “we” *the people*, the use of the manifesto-like rhetorical mode has been criss-crossing the political and aesthetic realm since the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, when the artist’s ‘sensibility’ towards, and appropriation of, revolutionary imaginary and rhetoric led to formulations such as Zola’s “revolution” of the “experimental method,” and to Strindberg’s fantasy of artists growing “strong as the pioneers of the French Revolution.”¹⁰³ After the 1880s, the writer’s discursive appropriation of the rhetorical mode of the genre was contemporaneous with the burgeoning number of artistic circles that claimed the term “avant-garde” for themselves, determining a shift in the meaning of the term from the political to the artistic sphere.

The Futurist manifesto as a literary construct performs effects that go beyond the mere articulation of a specific aesthetic position: by mythologizing the latter as a liberating fracture and a breakthrough within a history of intellectual struggle against *all* Art, which is here perceived as oppressively outmoded, the Futurist manifesto creates a simulacrum of rupture in what it presents as the linear history of an untenable and oppressive dominant order. The avant-garde’s promise to unleash the creative imagination and set it free from extant constraints is performed textually by means of the violent rupture with those hardened artistic practices that the manifesto rhetorically throws into the past. The constitutive link between the political manifesto and the artistic one is the discursive creation of an antagonistic historical subject, that is an oppositional “we,” taking the reins of history – be it social history or the history of Art – and rewriting it by following a selection principle stressing and leading up to the imperative need for the rupture for which the manifesto itself claims responsibility.

¹⁰³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 79.

Marinetti's use of the pronoun "we" presents certain consequences. As explained by Èmile Benveniste, "we" cannot be simply a "multiplication of identical objects" as is implied by its structure: such a formulation implies an impossible duplication of "I"s. Actually, "we" is

a *junction* between 'I' and the 'non-I', no matter what the content of this 'non-I' might be. This junction forms a new totality which is of a very special type whose components are not equivalent: in 'we' it is always 'I' which predominates since there cannot be 'we' except by starting with 'I' and this 'I' dominates the 'non-I' quality by means of its transcendent quality. The presence of 'I' is constitutive of 'we.'¹⁰⁴

What Benveniste defines as "the transcendent quality" of the 'I' in relation to the use of the pronoun "we" may be explained as its implied claim and ability to symbolize, represent, speak for the whole of "non-I"s. Such a 'colonizing' effect is achieved by means of the 'I's' privileging of its own experience over other subjects' experiences, points of view and irreducible differences. Not only does the totality of experiences lived through by the 'non-I's' disappear from the text but it is also appropriated by the 'I'. This implies, that "the 'we' of the manifesto is an inherently colonizing structure",¹⁰⁵ if not a somewhat 'totalitarian' one.

A very short digression on the relationship between Futurism and Fascism is in order. Marinetti's bombastic rhetoric, and the violence of his verbal attack upon the museum, might be reduced to what may be perceived as the movement's constitutive ideological alliance with Fascism. Indeed, on a rhetorical level, there is a tangible continuity between Futurism and Fascism that readily appropriated and used for its own propaganda Futurist slogans such as "largo ai giovani!" ("make way for the young!") or again, "marciare non marcire" ("marching and not rotting"), slogans that first appeared in Futurist Manifestoes. Such a reading, though, would dismiss the manifold differences internal to movement and the

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26. Lyon is quoting from E. Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, p. 202.

¹⁰⁵ J. Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*, p. 26.

internal inconsistencies of the Futurist ‘vision of the world’ due to the co-presence of anarchism, libertarianism, socialism and also the adoption of some of Sorel’s ideas. Marinetti’s protest, and the terms of its oppositional stance, arises from within the field of cultural production as the protest of *the artist*: the Fascist appropriation of the Futurist rhetoric and ‘cult of the youth’ – (*giovanilismo*) – constitutes only a subsequent moment, both historically and ideologically.¹⁰⁶ As Maurizio Calvesi suggests, the Futurists’ protest underwent a final orientation towards fascism and the right not because of its pre-fascist connotations, but because the movement was offered no other historical possibility. However, the very possibility of such an appropriation can be accounted for by, and can be considered as inherent in, the eclecticism characterising the manifesto as a genre. The features of discursive rhetoric deployed by the 1909 Futurist manifesto, that is, its direct, declarative, hortatory, speech-like, rhetorically simple straightforward style, are all features that were originally born within and used by political discourse: hence its easy and apparently seamless appropriation by Fascism. It is exactly the use of such plain, un-literary, ‘de-aestheticised’ language and such rhetorical unambiguousness that allows Marinetti to ‘populistically’ and illusorily bridge the gap between the elite – be it political or intellectual – and the ‘masses’ to whom the manifesto claims to offer “a chance to express themselves”.¹⁰⁷ Walter Benjamin comments that “Marinetti’s manifesto on the Ethiopian colonial war [...] has the virtue of clarity. Its formulations deserve to be accepted by dialecticians.”¹⁰⁸ The kind of ‘dialectics’ here promoted is actually the interplay of the contradictions inherent in, and solutions offered by, capitalism as a logic, that is, the use of war and colonialism as the mean to unleash the

¹⁰⁶ Cf. M. Calvesi. *Avanguardia di massa*, p. 58.

¹⁰⁷ W. Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, *Illuminations* p. 234.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 234-5.

“utilization of the productive forces [that] is impeded by the property system”.¹⁰⁹ With Futurism, the artist’s protest becomes a more or less conscious ancillary of politics: the artistic elite stands by the side of the political one by providing the latter with an advertisement-like linguistic construct that straightforwardly urges its ‘mass addressee’ to take part actively in ‘the dialectics of capitalism’. Despite the fact that Futurism precedes Fascism by quite a few years, the relationship between the two may actually be envisaged as a direct one because of the fundamental trait both ‘ideologies’ have in common, that is, their celebration of, and dependence upon, the economic and social structure organizing ‘life’ in capitalist society. According to Benjamin, both fascism and futurism use in an anti-revolutionary sense the structure of bourgeois society: “Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves.”¹¹⁰

As we will see in the next chapter, the grounds of Benjamin’s condemnation of futurism will also be restated later on by the Italian neo-avant-garde and especially by Edoardo Sanguineti.

III. Italian Futurism and the Theorizing of Postmodernism.

Italian Futurism carries out its rejection of art as a separate social institution by means of the artist’s rhetorical promotion of a conflation between the aesthetic and the social, a merging that stems from the attempt to abolish the spatial and ideological hiatus separating the autonomous artefact from the flow of commodity distribution and consumption. The movement’s feverish celebration of the notion of speed and simultaneity disrupts the stasis of

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

the 'museum' as an imaginary space, desacralizes the auratic a-temporal status of the objects therein contained, and forcibly throws them amidst an ever-present and contemporaneous conception of time, a sort of eternal 'now' that only the Futurist artist, allegedly, can suitably record and appropriate. The Futurist artefact accelerates the mode of temporality and 'sense of time' structuring the perception of reality and the modality of human experience itself: the subject's physical sensations, 'emotions' and possibilities are perceived as fast-evolving, continuously expanding. The notion of the artefact as the product of the lyrical dimension of a private subjectivity is rejected: the notion of subjectivity itself undergoes a total merging with the public, extra-personal realm of the economic system. Starting from modernization determined by technological progress and the new mimetic possibilities opened up by the development of the means of mechanical reproduction, Futurism accelerates the total surrender to 'modernity' of both subject and the artefact: the purported ability of the futurist artefact to record the slightest and newest change in perception of human experience, is a dystopian fantasy that presents, as a corollary, an unconditional refusal to be regarded as an 'artefact' at all, that is, a refusal to be relegated into the a-temporal dimension granted to the autonomous, 'museified' artistic object.

With the 1909 manifesto, Italian Futurism carries out a radical self-criticism of the notion of Art by elaborating an aesthetics that advocates its self-destruction in the name of its total conflation with 'life'.¹¹¹ The ambition to abolish the distance between the aesthetic and the social at the roots of the Futurists' hatred for the 'museum' and 'culture' generally is expressed in rhetorical and aesthetic celebration of Art as a realm that "would no longer be

¹¹¹ If the writers of the review 'Lacerba' articulated their notion of Art as a lyrical interpretation of reality that was "dynamic, active, reckless and yet distinct from empirical reality like the reality of Spirit is distinct from the object of its thought", the followers of Marinetti "conflated art with life" in their pursuit of 'action'. I am quoting from G. Pullini, *Aldo Palazzeschi*, p. 39; my translation. On 'Lacerba' and Futurism see also L. Mangoni, 'Le riviste del Novecento'.

fetishized for its aloofness but would be integrated into the fast-moving circuit of commodities”,¹¹² that is, by means of an exacerbated devaluation of the notion of the autonomy of art. Far from arising from the artist’s anti-bourgeois stance, the ‘self-criticism’ of the sub-system art carried out by Futurism actually expresses the ambition of “[t]he producer of artistic creativity [...] to join the commercial organization which is the muscle of modern life”¹¹³ – as stated by the Futurists Bruno Corradini and Emilio Settimelli.

Within the Anglophone academia, the debate over some extreme perspectives of Futurism was reopened only in the Eighties as a consequence of the theorizing of ‘postmodernity’. Although this may not suggest that ‘postmodernism’ is in any sense an uncritical and straightforward ‘repetition’ of Futurism, it does suggest that – as pointed out by Peter Nicholls – “it contains some strikingly similar fantasy elements. ‘Fantasy’, because they entail various utopian or dystopian ideas of collective destiny [such as] the idea of the subject caught up into a ‘total’ economic system”,¹¹⁴ a sort of ‘hyperspace’ or decentred global network allowing no ground for a possible distinction between a private ‘natural’ mode of experiencing objects and reality on the one hand and, on the other, a public, man-made, inauthentic and thoroughly ‘commodified’ mode of experience.¹¹⁵

The enthusiastic Futurist acclamation of the unmediated integration of the artefact with the economic system was the oppositional ‘fantasy’ of a minority elite carried out by means of a rhetorical contestation of cultural institutionality (museums, galleries, markets), that is, against the status of separateness of ‘high’ art from society at large. If one may not

¹¹² P. Nicholls, ‘Futurism, Gender, and Theories of Postmodernity’, pp. 209-210.

¹¹³ B. Corradini and E. Settimelli, ‘Weights, Measures and Prices of Artistic Genius 1914’, in Umbro Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos*, tr. Robert Brain *et al.*, p. 149.

¹¹⁴ P. Nicholls, ‘Futurism, Gender, and Theories of Postmodernity’, p. 213.

¹¹⁵ Nevertheless “the ‘hyperspace’ of postmodernity is seen [by its theoreticians] as alienating rather than emancipatory” (*ibid.*), as is in fact the case within a Futurist aesthetics.

exactly say that such a fantasy undergoes a straightforward uncritical repetition in the theorizing of postmodernity, it does seem legitimate to affirm that it undergoes a sort of amplified 'massification'. As an overall phenomenon and a specific theoretical and militant discourse arising from within (but also without) the academic world, 'postmodernism' "seems to presume" – and base its own legitimacy upon – "a cynical acceptance of the commodity status of art."¹¹⁶ What was then proposed, and perceived of, as a utopia that was still 'oppositional' with regard to the then extant situation of the cultural institution, has now become a thoroughly accepted assumption, a 'founding fantasy.' Such a statement does not aim at underplaying the actual changes that have transformed the cultural institution in the time intervening between Futurism and 'postmodernism': it does intimate, though, the genealogical 'precedent' allowing for the discursive articulation of 'postmodernism' itself. It is in this sense that 'postmodernism' can be said to be – as suggested by John Frow – an expanded "later generation"¹¹⁷ stemming and drawing credibility from the mythologizing power of the historical avant-garde, and especially, one would argue, Futurism.

Any general statement upon the historical avant-garde – and as a consequence, upon the neo-avant-gardes of the '60s – is influenced, in a more or less visible way, by the nature and praxis of the movement the critic singles out as a departure point for his or her analysis, and being the historical avant-garde such a complex phenomenon, the fact that there must always be *one* movement from which the enquiry has to be started, seems more than plausible. The point of departure of many reflections upon the viability of a 'repetition' of the social praxis of the historical avant-garde proposed by the Italian neo-avantgarde is – for both geographical and, especially, theoretical reasons, as the total acknowledgement of the problems posited by the state of commodification of literature and art generally, the point of

¹¹⁶ J. Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture*, p. 57.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

departure of their own activity – Italian Futurism. The consequences of the stigmatization Futurism has experienced within the Italian literary debate (especially up to the late Seventies, but also after) cannot be underestimated. And yet, in order to grasp these consequences, one still needs to fully understand the corollary – in terms of a theory of the avant-garde – of the critical act of granting Italian Futurism a place *within* the historical avant-garde, that is, the ensuing and logical impossibility “to set up the historical avant-garde as a model of good cultural-political practice.”¹¹⁸

IV. A Sociological Explanation of Futurism.

Maurizio Calvesi maintains that Futurism, with its tight and yet contradictory relationship between ‘protest’ and ‘consumerism’, anticipated, and is the key to the understanding of, many aporias of modern culture.¹¹⁹ As the first avant-garde movement, it is the founding ‘father’ of which any subsequent movement is ‘ashamed’. And yet, from informal art on, that is, from the mid ‘50s, it is very rare not to find a more or less direct link between avant-garde art and Futurist aesthetics.¹²⁰ The origin of the relationship between those two mutually contradicting ‘souls’ of the avant-garde, that is the conflation of ‘consumerism’ and ‘protest’, is to be found in the marginalization the artist’s function progressively undergoes in modern society: according to Calvesi, avant-garde art in all its manifestations is the attempt, on the part of the humanist intellectual, to remedy the overall devaluation, decline and loss of both the value and function of his traditional activity. Such an overall crisis is triggered, in the first place, by the development of the means of mechanical reproduction and the mass media: in a civilization where images are produced mechanically, the function of the visual artist

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ M. Calvesi, *Avanguardia di Massa*, p. 80.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

undergoes a shrinkage, if not a devaluation; and so does the function and activity of the writer, “whose forms of metaphorical communication (novelistic and poetic), that are specifically linked to the writing process, are rendered ineffective by hybrid and more powerful forms like the cinema”.¹²¹ The moment of creative protest is thus connected to a void of functions, that is, the ‘unemployment’ of the artist in the era of the machine. The reaction of both the visual artist and the writer, in the face of the perceived threat of the first signs of marginalization or ‘unemployment’, is twofold: on the one hand, they try to assimilate the new forms of communication, as in the case of Futurist “telegraphic” writing, or the appropriation of the mass media carried out, later on, by pop-art; on the other side, they attempt to find a new function and identity for their craft, that becomes the abstract craft of *imagining*.¹²²

As shown by the case of Futurism, it is especially the avant-garde artists’ appropriation of scientific and technological progress as an expression of modernity and bourgeois rationality that is fraught with contradictions: on the one hand, the artist is compelled – by the structural position he or she occupies within society – to criticize that very rationality because its historical development devalues his activity and potentially threatens to reduce it to the status of obsolescence; and yet, on the other side, the avant-garde artist appropriates the new techniques brought about by the mechanical reproduction of images in order to avoid that very devaluation and obsolescence. He or her can do so by introducing ‘time’ into the field of cultural innovation, i.e. by creating a ‘distinction mark’ (in Bourdieu’s terms) between his own ‘novel’ activity and the more traditional one of older artists. By appropriating those techniques and thus asserting the ‘novelty’ of his or her own

¹²¹ “le cui forme di comunicazione metaforica (romanzata o poetica) legate allo specifico della scrittura sono esautorate da forme ibride e di maggiore presa come il cinema”. *Ibid.*, p. 80. My translation.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

artistic activity, the avant-garde artist avoids the threat of devaluation and obsolescence; by the same token, the own fears of devaluation are projected onto the activity of older writers and artists: the 'novelty' he or her introduces within the field actually makes any activity but his or her own be perceived as 'old' and obsolete.

The function of the mass media was not limited to the diffusion of the language of the avant-garde movements: Futurism was both a consequence of and a reaction against them: With Futurism,

[...] avant-garde language, on the one hand, expresses this protest against marginalizing power, and, on the other hand, it also hypothesises the modalities of its appropriation: the appropriation of power and the appropriation of its instruments – the mass-media and the industry – is carried out by the very act of exalting them and by means of the appropriative power of the language they create, a language that is modelled on the new means of production and communication, a potentially massifying language.¹²³

On the one hand, the creative protest of the avant-garde artist mirrors the accelerated rhythm of production and consumption, and, on the other, it expresses the artist's reaction against the marginalization his or her role and function undergoes because of such a model. His or her protest is thus the protest of those who belong to an elite that is (and can be) unproductive thanks to its privileged status, i. e., the kind of (apparent) non-productiveness that is specific to the realm of Art. And yet, his marginalisation and exclusion from the productive system are the consequence of his privileged status. The ambition and aspiration to take part in it, is contradictorily carried out by

¹²³ "il linguaggio avanguardistico, mentre esprime questa protesta contro il potere emarginante, ipotizza anche le modalità di un'appropriazione, appropriazione del potere e appropriazione dei suoi strumenti – mass-media ed industrie – attraverso l'esaltazione dei medesimi e grazie alla stessa forza appropriativa del linguaggio, in quanto modellato sui nuovi mezzi di produzione e di comunicazione, e potenzialmente massificante". *Ibid.*, p. 91. My translation.

commodifying his own exclusion, that is, by creating the product (= the commodified language [il linguaggio vendibile]) of his exclusion (= protest). The elective [elettivo] language of an excluded elite that 'elects' itself to represent the contradictions – that are internal to society and then to itself [to the excluded élite] – and to be at the front of the contradiction, *against* society, and against itself.¹²⁴

By the “contradictions” that are inherent first in society at large and that, in a subsequent moment, are introduced within the realm of art by means of the avant-garde’s protest, Calvesi means the process of ideological devaluation humanism (understood as abstract knowledge that cannot be applied to positive use within industrial productivity) has historically undergone. Accordingly, it is the realm of knowledge itself at large that becomes exposed to internal contradiction by its own sub-division between productive knowledge, that is, scientific and technological knowledge on the one hand and, on the other, unproductive knowledge such as traditional humanist knowledge. The unproductiveness of artistic activity becomes more and more evident with the progressive development of the uses of scientific and technological knowledge and its ensuing growth in terms of ideological legitimization within society at large. The more lucid consciousness of the anachronistic unproductiveness of humanism becomes, the more humanism as unproductive and obsolete knowledge is rejected by the humanist artist himself: the rift between the “two knowledges” enters the realm of art as a form of self-contradiction of the realm itself, that is, as a self-criticism of the unproductiveness of artistic activity: hence the Futurists’ increased consciousness of the necessity for up-grading and modernization of the expressive means of artistic language and of the necessity for its transformation in terms that are congenial to the process of

¹²⁴ “mercificare la propria esclusione, creando al dunque il prodotto (= il linguaggio vendibile) dell'emarginazione (= protesta). Linguaggio elettivo di un'emarginazione 'eletta', ad auto-eleggentesi a specchio delle contraddizioni – interne alla società e dunque a se stessa – e a guida della contraddizione, *contro* la società e contro se stessa”. *Ibid.*, p. 56. My translation.

technological progress. In other words, the Futurist artist's criticism of the separateness of the realm of art and its turning against itself, is the consequence of the devaluation humanist knowledge has historically undergone. This determines "the turning of humanist cultures against their own humanism"¹²⁵ that is, the avant-garde as an intellectual elite claiming a role of actual productiveness and, thus, involvement, within society at large. Within the Futurist protest particularly, the up-grading of the institution of artistic language on the model of the language of the means of mass communications coexists with the request for an expanded social role for the artist, as Marinetti's plea for 'artecracy' exemplifies, a request that without stating clearly the precise modality of the sought after integration within the productive system, ends up by vaguely demanding that the artist be endowed with more political and social power. And yet, such a confusedly corporatist request for an expanded role, is but an attempt to remedy the decline and loss of value of the humanist intellectual in the face of the rise – in terms of perceived legitimization – of the activity of the technician within the then nascent mass communications industry.

In this respect, it may be worthwhile recalling that the members of the historical avant-garde movements could still afford the ambition, if not the illusion, to situate themselves in a frontally oppositional stance against the culture industry, not least because of their still relative material independence from the latter. One of the *Bünde* that had to be respected by anyone aspiring to be part of the Surrealist movement was the interdiction to any of its members to work. Despite Italian Futurism's celebration of the integration of Art into the fast-moving circuit of commodities by means of the aesthetic idealization of the notion of speed brought about by technological progress, F. T. Marinetti's own economic

¹²⁵ "il rivoltarsi delle culture umanistiche contro il loro stesso umanismo", *ibid.*, p. 83. My translation.

situation would allow him to publish many of the Futurist Manifestoes, and also the journal *Poesia*, at his own expenses.

Conclusion

The Futurist artist introduces within the realm of art, a notion of ‘novelty’ that is totally ‘heteronomous’ in relation to the field of cultural production. The criticism of the museum as the metaphor of the autonomy of art is thus carried out by means of appropriating the social and productive system that is taking place *outside* the museum. With its ‘telegraphic poetry,’ not only does Futurism appropriate the forms of technological progress but also, by means of the supposedly absolute heteronomous novelty it introduces within the art institution, it apocalyptically sanctions the end of the latter as an inherently obsolete, and thus useless, social system.

In the previous chapter we discussed Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and we saw that Bürger’s understanding of the historical avant-garde is based on the belief in the ability of the latter to criticize Art as a separate institution and to break the barriers separating it from the praxis of ‘life’. Bürger defines this as the “self-criticism of the subsystem art” and uses it as the grounds for a distinction between the avant-garde art – that conflates art and life – and modernist art – that does not. The present chapter has focussed on the performative effects of the Futurists’ use of the manifesto, i.e. the conflation of ‘art’ with ‘life’. We have seen, though, that the futurist artist’s indebtedness to and re-elaboration of previous artistic movements and styles makes this merging mainly a rhetorical one. To use the notion of “self-criticism” as a distinction between the historical avant-garde and Modernism is a form of tribute the critic pays to the self-mythologizing rhetoric deployed by the avant-garde’s use of

the manifesto, a consequence of the performative function of the genre and of its apocalyptic warnings and promises. Indeed, ultimately both modernist and avant-gardist work are characterized by a very high degree of self-referentiality – with the caveat that the self-referentiality of the latter is characterized by a strong sense of collective, supra-individual apocalypse.

Instead of being taken at face value, the use of the manifesto is best seen in terms of the systematic formation of reputation, sometimes replacing creative work, even making it irrelevant. The ‘scandal’ in the avant-garde movements has a central role in this process of reputation-building: like the manifesto, it fractures the arena of public speech, not on political grounds, but within the terms of show business, of the society of the spectacle, through exhibitionism, publicity and fame.¹²⁶ The artist becomes a celebrity by acquiring a specific social image which he or she ‘represents’ in the café. The literary café, be it the *Caffè Savini* in Milan – the general quarter from where Marinetti and the Futurists’ riotous ramblings would start from and return to – or the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich where the Dadaists’ happenings would take place, is the direct precursor of the society of the spectacle, the institutionalized public space where the artist exhibits his or her public persona and his or her image becomes ‘expendable’. The mechanisms of such ‘performances’ are already part of the ‘culture industry’ as the artist’s ‘exhibition’ is directed to the journalist’s eye. The picturesque gestures and provoking behaviour – Marinetti’s bloodstained face after a confrontation with a Milanese public that, unappreciative of the futurist ‘verb’, throws

¹²⁶ Cf. C. Salaris, *Il futurismo e la pubblicità. Dalla pubblicità dell’arte all’arte della pubblicità*. For the advertising function of the manifesto see also L. Miretti, ‘Manifesto e romanzo. Generi a confronto nel primo futurismo’.

vegetables at him ¹²⁷ – are processed by the journalist's direct and straightforward prose and becomes every-day information, its resonance being systematically amplified by the newspapers. Indeed, mass popularity for its most daring artists was the 'project' the avant-garde did manage to achieve. As a Surrealist, Salvador Dali may have been forbidden to work, but this did not prevent him from becoming a mass culture icon and even make a hilarious appearance in 1952 on the then very popular American television game show "What's My Line?". From 1947 to the '60s, Picasso devoted himself almost entirely to ceramics, a rather humble craftmanship, reinterpreting traditional modelling and decorating techniques. He wanted his ceramics to be widely available and had limited editions created of some of his work. ¹²⁸ Some saw Picasso's late phase as a signal of his artistic decadence but Picasso's dream that the average French household would be able to have his ceramics at a relatively affordable price actually seems to exemplify the avant-garde's implicit aspiration to become a mass phenomenon.

¹²⁷ For a more detailed account of Marinetti's exploits in the Caffé Savini cf. R. Campagnano, 'Istituti e associazioni di cultura nel Novecento', p. 1018. Cf. also C. Linati, 'Al caffè con Linati', in E. Falqui (ed.), *Caffé letterari*, p. 320.

¹²⁸ Cf. C. Finn and R. Watban (eds.), *Picasso: Fired with Passion*.

Chapter Three: The Neo-avant-garde's Anxiety for Originality

I. The Theoretical Debate of The Italian Neo-avant-garde: A Confrontation with and Rejection of the Historical Avant-garde.

The neo-avant-garde's reluctance and unwillingness to make direct and explicit use of the manifesto – and, as a consequence, to exploit the emancipatory political discourse which is an unavoidable residual element of the genre – may be accounted for by their stance, within the post-war debate on engagement, against subordinating art to political action. This is particularly relevant considering the strong political connotations of the uses made of the genre previous to, during, and reminiscent of, the fascist period - from the various Futurist Manifestoes, to the *Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals* and the ensuing *Manifesto of the Non-Fascist Intellectuals*. Another, and far more convincing, hypothesis transcending the 'politicality' of the genre and regarding the constitutive relationship of the neo-avant-garde with the dynamics of the culture industry, might account for the corollary of such a stance, that is, the capillary proliferation of their theoretical discourse in the form of numerous individual texts.¹²⁹ To put it otherwise, the members' theoretical individualism is a consequence of their personal enmeshment within the culture industry, that is, of their individualistic struggle to make their own mark and name, to gain credibility, fame and distinction – or as Pierre Bourdieu would put it, cultural capital – even, sometimes, at the expenses of other members. It is at this point that the dramatic changes and differences distinguishing the phenomenon of the neo-avant-garde from its historical counterpart appear to be stronger than ever, differences that reside in the de-radicalization, re-institutionalization and unprecedented expansion of theoretical discourse.

¹²⁹ Cf. L. De Maria, 'Ricognizione sui testi', pp. 138-9.

The members of the neo-avant-garde expressed their positions on art, literature and the possibility for avant-garde literature individually, in a series of disparate occasions, such as meetings, articles and theoretical interventions on the journals *Il Verri* and *Quindici*, and also in *Materiali*, the series of books on literary criticism published by Feltrinelli. The result is a vast and complex corpus of theoretical work-in-progress in which the totality of personal points of view, often conflicting, fails to yield an overall consistent intimation of a commonly shared meaning and purpose for literature and avant-garde art. The group's stance of inclusive openness and alliance-seeking towards other writers, musicians and painters, determines the somewhat unstable and fluctuating number of artists and writers taking part in the group's meetings and activity. Also, the absence of an enforcing common poetics – as would be exemplified by a collective manifesto – gives no ground for the excommunication of 'devious' artistic procedures typical of the historical avant-garde.

No unitary point of view is imposed upon the unique personal stances of the members, as a logic of reckless mutual control acts as a check against the possibility that one member might impose his or her ideas upon the others. The element unifying their argumentations over literature is the red thread of a 'communal disposition' or intellectual 'habitus', that is to say, a dialogical methodology yielding a cluster of interpretations of the function and practice of literature that are tentative and 'experimental': each member's aesthetic position is open to refutation and counter-interpretation by other members' more convincing reconstructions of the literary fact carried out through more pertinent interpretive tools. On a methodological level, their discursive construction of literature as an object for study seems to present a certain affinity – at least on a methodological level – with the scientific methodology of trial and error: every member's position is an approximation to a 'truthful' ideal position that other members might support and identify with, but only after

careful scrutiny and examination carried out on a collective basis: this dialogical methodology of trial and error seems to be the dominant practice within the group and, as an intellectual *habitus*, it is particularly evident in the debates of the Gruppo 63's annual meetings taking place between 1963 and 1967.

Indeed, both the group's inclusive attitude and the 'experimental' open-endedness of their theoretical work in progress seem to foster, on the one hand, a move away from the sectarian *modus operandi* typical of many avant-garde movements and, on the other hand, an implicit critique of the manifesto, by means of which that sectarianism is discursively articulated as an enforcing, non-dialogical position. This openness to refutation, however, is valid only within the scope of the group itself, as the experimentally dialogical disposition governing its internal dynamics becomes an impenetrable barrier of exacerbated polemics against the ideas about art and literature purported by other left-oriented practitioners within the literary field. In other words, although leaving ample freedom for artistic action within the area of influence of the group itself, their envisaging of literature as a practice takes on a non-dialogical, oppositional, 'prescriptive,' polemical – and, at times, scornful and openly offensive – rhetorical mode when articulated as a response to the aesthetic positions of the older generation of writers and intellectuals loosely belonging to the area of the 'traditional left.'

What needs to be stressed here is, on the one hand, the group's capacity to carry out a frontal opposition against some factions of the literary field, and, on the other hand, its ability to contain and absorb a multiplicity of contrasting and diverging ideological and aesthetic stances within itself. This absence of a unitary ideological and aesthetic stance makes the critic reluctant to consider the Italian neo-avant-garde as an 'avant-garde' movement at all.

If one compares the neo-avant-garde with its historical counterpart, one cannot but notice a sort of ‘implosion’ of the antagonistic moment resulting in a sort of polemical individualism fragmenting from within into a multiplicity of positions. This is the only aesthetic stance common to all members and constitutes the only *raison d’être* of the neo-avant-garde, that is, the elevation to dogma of an initially legitimate critique of traditional artistic forms rooted in mimesis and representation. Like the historical avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde articulates its protest against the mimetic function of language in terms of an irreducible antagonism towards society at large – the public – and towards literary tradition – represented by the older generation of writers and intellectuals and their literary production – by means of a specialised language or sectarian jargon expressing the artist’s protest against, but also a discursive re-elaboration of, his or her own state of ‘dejection’ within bourgeois society.

The neo-avant-garde’s acknowledgment of the profound differences setting apart the cultural situation giving rise to their ‘protest’ as artists and intellectuals from the conditions sustaining their historical counterpart urges them to criticize unanimously and reject unconditionally the possibility of carrying out a ‘repetition’ of the self-criticism of the Art institution. As suggested by Edoardo Sanguineti, “in their general configuration, the neo-avant-gardes constitute an appeal against neo-capitalism in a way that is totally equivalent to the one in which the historical avant-gardes constituted [...] an appeal against historical capitalism.”¹³⁰ While Angelo Guglielmi, maintains that “the picturesque historical avant-

¹³⁰ “le neo-avanguardie costituiscono, nella loro configurazione generale, un appello contro l’ordine neo-capitalistico, in modo al tutto equivalente a quello in cui le avanguardie storiche già costituirono, nella loro configurazione generale sempre, un appello contro l’ordine del capitalismo storico”, E. Sanguineti, ‘Avanguardia, società, impegno’, *Linguaggio e ideologia*, p. 64. My translation.

garde, with its manifestoes, is an anachronistic movement”,¹³¹ Alfredo Giuliani comments that the circumstances sustaining the protest of the historical avant-garde “are conditions that do not repeat themselves. Today, only an African poet could maybe interpret “the social mandate” according to the unquestionable meaning Majakovskj gave it.”¹³²

The total dependence upon the “culture industry” on the part of the young members of the neo-avant-garde makes apparent the extent of the reduction of the hiatus between the production of art and its distribution and consumption. As Angelo Guglielmi points out, “[t]oday Proust wouldn’t have to wait ten years before publishing, at his own expense, the first volume of the *Recherche* [...]”;¹³³ moreover, “the culture industry having reached such a degree of development, its further expansion can happen only on the level of the superfluous and of the encouragement of the snob: the production of the extraordinary product is encouraged, with no quality standards imposed on it”.¹³⁴ The product that appears as superfluous, snob and extraordinary because of its novelty and its being ahead of the temporary dimension within which the market’s expectations are framed has thus reached the point of full integration and functionality within the growth of the “culture industry” as it fits perfectly its re-organization, fragmentation and sub-division into specialised areas. This determines the neo-avant-garde’s fundamental awareness of the actual, pervasive and unavoidable marketability of their own artistic products: “the culture industry bases its prosperity exactly on peak production. To carry on obstinately denying such a situation is a

¹³¹ “l’avanguardia storica (pittorresca dei manifesti) è un movimento anacronistico”, A. Guglielmi, ‘Avanguardia e sperimentalismo’, in *Gruppo 63: Critica e Teoria*, p. 334. My translation.

¹³² “Sono condizioni che non si ripetono. Forse oggi soltanto un poeta africano potrebbe interpretare il “mandato sociale” nel senso indubitato che gli dava Majakovskj”, A. Giuliani, ‘L’ideologia non supplisce il mestiere’, *Immagini e maniere*, pp. 23-4. My translation.

¹³³ “Oggi Proust non avrebbe aspettato dieci anni prima di pubblicare a spese sue il primo volume della *Recherche*”, A. Guglielmi, ‘Avanguardia e sperimentalismo’, in *Gruppo 63: Critica e teoria*, p. 333. My translation.

¹³⁴ “l’industria culturale [...] essendo giunta a un tale grado di sviluppo per cui la sua ulteriore crescita può avvenire sul piano del superfluo e dell’indicazione snob, incoraggia il prodotto comunque straordinario, senza porre limiti di qualità”, *ibid.*, my translation.

useless fiction.”¹³⁵ According to Guglielmi, a repetition of the Futurists’ protest would be useless and superfluous: within a changed situation, the repetition of the Futurists’ “act[ing] on the external scaffoldings of the traditional institution of language with the aim of bringing it to an irreversible crisis-point and denouncing its substantial unproductiveness”¹³⁶, far from being potentially oppositional, would actually re-confirm and re-state the degree of ‘heteronomy’ that is daily undergone by literary language because of its extensive rationalization within the reorganization of the culture industry. In other words, what Guglielmi describes as the current “cultural situation”, that is the pervasive commodification of the artefact (in Bürger’s terms, its ‘false sublation’) makes undeniably apparent the productiveness of literary language itself.

For Guglielmi, the “present cultural situation” requires a “political action”¹³⁷ that has to be based on radical rejection of the historical avant-garde: “there is no actual reason for the repetition of an avant-garde movement”.¹³⁸ The external and extra-textual protest of the latter – and Marinetti is a case in point – has yielded “results that [...] do not seem to be [...] relevant from an artistic point of view”¹³⁹ as it does not manage to go beyond its initial polemical slant because of it is “deprived of a clear ideological basis and serious expressive intentions”.¹⁴⁰ The linguistic revolution of the “rabble-rousing” Futurists fails to put under serious threat the “internal ideological nucleus of language that in fact remains intact and

¹³⁵ “l’industria culturale fonda la sua prosperità proprio su una produzione di punta. Ostinarsi a comportarsi come se così non fosse è una inutile finzione”, *ibid.*, p. 332. My translation.

¹³⁶ “operano sulla impalcatura esterna dell’istituto linguistico tradizionale con lo scopo di portarlo a un punto irriversibile di crisi, di denunciarne la sostanziale improduttività.” *Ibid.*, p. 330, my translation.

¹³⁷ “azione politica”, *ibid.*, p. 333. My translation.

¹³⁸ “non esistono nella attuale situazione culturale ragioni sufficienti per la ripresa di un movimento di avanguardia”, *ibid.*, p. 329. My translation.

¹³⁹ “risultati che [...] non paiono essere [...] importanti dal punto di vista del loro rilievo artistico”, *ibid.*, p. 328. My translation.

¹⁴⁰ “nasce [...] al di fuori di una chiara base ideologica e di serie intenzioni espressive”, *ibid.*, p. 330. My translation.

survives their attacks”.¹⁴¹ Guglielmi’s rejection of the Futurist legacy is thus motivated by their failure – on a formal level – to understand the internal mechanisms of literary language, as their interventions upon it are only ‘external’ and superficial. The Futurists’ linguistic revolution is ultimately ineffectual because, in the attempt to suppress the barriers between institutionalised literary language and common, every-day language by means of ideological rejection of the specificity of the former and the choice of a radically de-aestheticised language as a medium and instrument ‘communicating’ their social protest, the Futurists show a total lack of a “sense of language” that, according to Guglielmi, *has* to be specific to any artistic activity which aims at elaborating and carrying out an oppositional project.

On one side, Guglielmi singles out Futurism to articulate his total condemnation of the historical avant-garde; on the other side, such a condemnation is insensibly generalised to all avant-garde Art: “never was, and never is, the sense of language so absent as in the avant-garde writer. Today one can think of the American *Beatniks* or the English *Enraged*”.¹⁴² For Guglielmi, the artist’s oppositionality – in order to be actually effective – is to be framed within, work on, and exploit, all the possibilities that are offered by, and are specifically contained within, the structures of literary language and ‘literariness’ as such. “In reality, Italian literature today does not run the risk [...] of avant-gardism [...] And yet, such danger can be found within the world of the figurative arts”.¹⁴³ The “danger” of a ‘repetition’ of the self-criticism of the art institutionality resides in its inability, within a changed cultural situation, to be effectively oppositional.

¹⁴¹ “il nucleo interno o ideologico della lingua rimane intatto o meglio sfugge alla loro violenza”, *ibid.* My translation.

¹⁴² “mai senso della lingua fu ed è così mancante come negli scrittori d’avanguardia. Si pensi oggi ai *beatniks* americani o agli arrabbiati inglesi”, *ibid.*, p. 331. My translation.

¹⁴³ “semmai di pericoli in atto di questo tipo è più facile rinvenire nel mondo delle arti figurative”, *ibid.*, p. 334. My translation.

It is plausible to suppose that when referring to the danger of “avant-gardism” within the figurative arts, Guglielmi is implicitly condemning the activity of Piero Manzoni: with his *Merda d’artista* (90 cans of the artist’s excrement hermetically closed exhibited at the Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome in 1961, two years before Guglielmi’s ‘Avanguardia e sperimentalismo’) and *Air Bodies* (balloons inflated with the artist’s breath, 1961),¹⁴⁴ Manzoni calls into question both the notion of art itself and the possibilities for the ‘museification’ of his own personally contrived variations of the *objet trouvé*. And yet, the outrageous radicalism of his protest is only an apparent one as, by working within the by then established (if not widely accepted) ‘tradition’ of the *ready made* initiated by Marcel Duchamp, Manzoni’s avant-gardism is readily catalogued and displayed in the museum that, in Edoardo Sanguineti’s words, “swallows it in all tranquillity, like in the worst of tales [...]”.

¹⁴⁵ The pervasive commodification of the artefact transforms any form of repetition of the self-criticism of the sub-system art into yet another ‘mannerism’ readily absorbed and exploited by the market, that is, in Guglielmi’s own words, “avant-gardism”. The main difference between “avant-gardism” and its historical counterpart resides in the temporal hiatus intervening between production and ‘museification’: within the conditions sustaining the phenomenon of “avant-gardism”, the hiatus intervening between the moment when the “artistic” gesture repeating the self-criticism of the subsystem Art is first produced and the moment when it is ‘museified’ and accepted by the public as artefact is sensibly reduced, if not erased. The lack of resistance and delay within the overall ‘museification’ process, is but

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Eco on Piero Manzoni: “Quando Piero Manzoni dipinge una tela Bianca fa ancora della pittura sperimentale: quando immette in un museo una scatola ermeticamente chiusa ed annuncia che contiene “merda d’artista”, fa dell’avanguardia. Nel primo caso discute le possibilità stesse della pittura, nel secondo l’idea stessa di arte e di museificabilità”. U Eco, ‘Il Gruppo 63, lo sperimentalismo e l’avanguardia’, *Sugli specchi e altri saggi*, p. 98

¹⁴⁵ “come nelle peggiori delle favole, se la ingoia tutta tranquillamente”, E. Sanguineti, ‘Sopra l’avanguardia’, *Ideologia e linguaggio*, p. 57. My translation.

a tangible symptom of the obsolescence, de-radicalization and total lack of efficacy inherent in any attempt at 'repetition'. As Fausto Curi suggests,

In the neo-capitalistic context, any revolutionary gesture that may be carried out, for instance, by means of a poetic work, inevitably leads to the commodification of the work itself and, as a consequence, to the progressive exhaustion of that gesture's revolutionary impetus. Nevertheless this does not exclude the necessity of that gesture: to the contrary, it demands that it be continuously replicated in order to put in crisis continuously the [...] state of normality determined by the structural level.¹⁴⁶

Curi is saying that a truly contemporary oppositional work must be able to problematize the commodification of the work of art, to unmask its false normality by refusing to accept it and conform to it in the first place, by representing, evoking and working upon the widespread crisis triggered by such a commodification. And yet, 'avant-gardism' does not seem a viable option as it fails to evoke, represent and effectively elaborate the epochal crisis the contemporary artist feels thrown into. According to Curi, "neo-capitalistic society has 'accepted' avant-garde art and avant-garde art has 'accepted' neo-capitalistic society. Obviously, such acceptance implies neither the latter's renunciation of its plans of exploitation and commodification (actually, it favours them) nor the former's repudiation of its subversive engagement".¹⁴⁷ The problem of the neo-avant-garde as an overall phenomenon is thus how to up-date and renovate the social and textual practices of the historical avant-garde in conformity with the "historical inclination we are experimenting"

¹⁴⁶ "In un contesto neocapitalistico, ogni gesto rivoluzionario che si compia, poniamo, attraverso un'opera di poesia, si conclude inevitabilmente con la mercificazione dell'opera stessa e dunque con il progressivo esaurimento della carica rivoluzionaria di quel gesto. Ma ciò non toglie che esso sia stato necessario: impone semmai che sia di continuo replicato, onde mettere di continuo in crisi lo stato di normalità della crisi determinato dal piano strutturale." F. Curi, 'Sulla giovane poesia', *Ordine e disordine*, p. 90. My translation.

¹⁴⁷ "La società neocapitalistica ha 'accettato' l'arte d'avanguardia e l'arte d'avanguardia ha 'accettato' la società neocapitalistica. Ovviamente, l'accettazione non implica affatto la rinuncia da parte di quest'ultima ai propositi di sfruttamento e di mercificazione (anzi li favorisce), né implica il ripudio dell'impegno eversivo da parte della prima", F. Curi, 'Tesi per una storia delle avanguardie', in *Gruppo 63: Critica e Teoria*, p. 325. My translation.

¹⁴⁸. The obsolescence and loss of impact ensuing from the possible use and re-enactment of those modalities within a changed socialization of culture determines the need for such a renewal. As pointed out by Umberto Eco, "This generation has understood that the public and eye-catching gesture of revolt, the gesture that produces immediate effects, that *épâte le bourgeois*, has lost any function. The gesture is taken in, commodified, exhibited in the gallery, the museum, the library [...] revolutionary gesture is to be replaced by slow research, revolt by philology". ¹⁴⁹

There is one point that needs to be strongly stressed in order to appreciate fully the implications of the neo-avant-garde's observations – via Futurism – on the historical avant-garde: these observations constitute as much an exercise in literary history as a theoretical reflection on avant-garde art's anxiety about growing old, on the danger of losing its power to create original works and to keep on inventing new techniques, i.e. on the perceived impossibility to live up to the Sisyphean task the avant-garde has set for itself – in Rosalind Krauss' words – "the myth of originality".¹⁵⁰ The repetition of the Futurists' denunciation of the unproductiveness of literature and 'museified' culture is obsolete because of the degree of productiveness they have actually reached. Futurism seems to be used as a negative yardstick and term of comparison epitomizing what must *not* be done because of its perceived failure to affect the status of alienation undergone by literary language as a specific institution, an alienation caused by the instrumental use it structurally undergoes within bourgeois means-ends rationality.

¹⁴⁸ "in maniera adeguata all'inclinazione storica che sperimentiamo", E. Sanguineti, 'Avanguardia, società, impegno', *Ideologia e Linguaggio*, p. 63. My translation.

¹⁴⁹ "Questa generazione ha capito che il gesto di rivolta pubblico e appariscente, quello che si risolve nel risultato immediato, che *épâte le bourgeois*, ha perduto ogni funzione. Il gesto viene accolto, fatto merce, esposto in galleria, nel museo, nella biblioteca [...] al gesto rivoluzionario, si deve sostituire la lenta ricerca, alla rivolta la filologia." Umberto Eco, 'La generazione di Nettuno', in *Gruppo 63 La nuova letteratura*, pp. 412-3.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. R. E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*, *passim*.

It may be useful to frame the members' observations on Futurism within the aesthetic tenets expressed in Luciano Anceschi's *Autonomia ed eteronomia dell'arte* (1939), as this text is of fundamental relevance for the Italian neo-avant-garde. As we will see, *Autonomia ed eteronomia dell'arte* proposes a re-evaluation of the relative autonomy of Art and literature from everyday life, a position that will be variously elaborated by the members of the neo-avant-garde. The notion of the autonomy of Art and literature that was the object of the Futurist protest had first been articulated in the 19th century by Kant and Shiller. Andreas Huyssen suggests that it is in relation to the artist's position in regard to the autonomy doctrine that the distinction between avant-garde and modernist aesthetics becomes evident as "in modernism art and literature retained their traditional 19th century autonomy from everyday life".¹⁵¹ Nevertheless, as we have seen in the introduction to the present work, the clear-cut distinction, on a theoretical level, between modernism and avant-garde is problematic. The dialectical role that the autonomy doctrine plays in such distinction can be a case in point: the autonomy doctrine – i. e. its sublation – is central also in Bürger's theorization of the Avant-garde.

II. Futurism within the Italian Literary Debate: A Reading through the Neo-avant-garde.

II.I About the Autonomy of Art: Luciano Anceschi.

Anceschi had an impressive overall influence on many members of the neo-avant-garde: both Nanni Balestrini and Antonio Porta were his students at the *liceo* Vittorio Veneto in Milan.¹⁵² Anceschi's ideas on art and literature also influenced Angelo Guglielmi, Giorgio Manganelli, Renato Barilli and Fausto Curi (the latter re-worked them towards a more 'materialistic'

¹⁵¹ A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, p. 163.

¹⁵² Cf. L. Anceschi, 'Pretesti', p. 55.

direction).¹⁵³ According to Luciano Anceschi, the mentor of many members of the neo-avant-garde and the ‘father’ figure that helped them to found the review *Il Verri* (1956), their first institutional space, “[t]he Futurist poetics [...] appears as a sort of deteriorated linguistic symbolism that has been hurriedly translated into Italian by an interpreter [Marinetti] who is literal, approximate and, more importantly, without tradition, and is impetuously animated by the philosophies of action and intuition”.¹⁵⁴

Anceschi judges Marinetti’s aesthetics and artistic practice as “hurried” and ultimately, ‘un-artistic’, because of the Futurists’ suppression of the hiatus between ‘art’ and ‘life’ at the roots of Marinetti’s lack of artistic consciousness and intellectual vigour and his ensuing failure to grant an artistic (aesthetically significant) form to the human experience of a fast-changing outer (extra-literary) reality. Anceschi’s negative judgement of Marinetti is thus caused by the latter’s inability to transfigure raw every-day experience into an artistic form that is in a formally meaningful dialogic relationship with literary tradition. And yet, given the relevance granted by Anceschi to the necessity of Art to evolve its formal techniques and means of expression so that it can keep up with ever-changing reality (that is, the heteronomy pole immanent in the realm of art), his argument cannot be reduced to the terms of Crocean aesthetics. For Anceschi, Marinetti’s programme fails to play out the dialectics between autonomy and heteronomy in Art, i.e. “the necessity of art to fully place itself among all levels of life (heteronomy)”,¹⁵⁵ and “the necessity to distinguish art from

¹⁵³ Cf. M. Guglielmetti and G. Zaccaria, *La critica letteraria. Dallo storicismo alla semiologia*, p. 94.

¹⁵⁴ “La poetica futurista appare così come una sorta di deteriore simbolismo linguistico tradotto frettolosamente in italiano da un interprete letterale, approssimativo, e soprattutto senza tradizioni, impetuosamente animato dalle filosofie dell’azione e dell’intuizione”, L. Anceschi, *Le poetiche del Novecento in Italia*, pp. 160-1. My translation.

¹⁵⁵ “[...]la necessità dell’arte di inserirsi in modo pieno in tutti i piani della vita (eteronomia)”, L. Anceschi, *Autonomia ed eteronomia dell’arte. Saggio di fenomenologia delle poetiche*, p. 226. My translation. *Autonomia ed eteronomia dell’arte* was first published in 1936 and it is probably the most influential formulation (in Italy) of aesthetic thought after Benedetto Croce: indeed, the long essay’s phenomenological approach to the object of study ‘Art’ can be seen as a critique of the absolute prominence Croce’s idealism grants to the doctrine of the

other aspects and moments of the real and of reason (autonomy)".¹⁵⁶ In Anceschi's terms, Marinetti fails to carry out a balanced mediation between the two opposing tensions that trigger off the contradictions that have been inherent in all the most significant artistic activity since the development of 'aesthetics' as a separate domain of enquiry in post-Kantian philosophy. These contradictions are caused by the confrontation between the fundamental aesthetic concepts of the autonomy of art on the one hand and, on the other, by the artist's own ambition to express and contain, within his or her own formal practice, all life and reality. This contradictory confrontation gives rise to the phenomenological manifestation of a succession of new artistic forms within the literary canon, a manifestation that actually constitutes the "concrete history"¹⁵⁷ of the realm of art.¹⁵⁸

On the one hand, it is true that "in relation to progress and to the ever-growing velocity of emotions, a mode of *perception by analogy* becomes more and more natural for man";¹⁵⁹ and yet, on the other hand the Futurists' suppression of the hiatus between 'art' and 'life' results in the total neutralization of the potential effects inherent in the moment of autonomy, that is, its capacity to act as a "moment of purification of the aesthetic value of art".¹⁶⁰ The Futurists' suppression of the hiatus between 'art' and 'life' and their ensuing

autonomy of art compared to other aspects of social life. However, Anceschi also moves within the limits of, and is by and large faithful to, the autonomy doctrine: hence his condemnation of the avant-gardist abolition of the hiatus between art and life.

¹⁵⁶ "il bisogno di distinguere l'arte dagli altri aspetti e momenti del reale e della ragione (autonomia)", *ibid.* My translation.

¹⁵⁷ "storia concreta", L. Anceschi, *Autonomia ed eteronomia dell'arte*, p. 205. My translation.

¹⁵⁸ The autonomy notion is thus relentlessly contrasted with the specific 'formal' modes and techniques the artist has elaborated in order to assert and keep faith with Art's fundamental ambition to express, contain and represent the totality of an ever-changing life and reality. For Anceschi, this is the essential dichotomy between the autonomy pole and the heteronomy pole delimiting the ideal boundaries of the realm of Art. In other words, Marinetti's practice fails to re-enact meaningfully the "continuous dialectic between the principle of autonomy of the aesthetic field of art and that of its heteronomy", L. Anceschi, *Autonomia ed eteronomia dell'arte*, p. 225. My translation.

¹⁵⁹ "in rapporto al progresso, alla velocità sempre crescente delle emozioni, un modo di *percezione per analogia* si fa sempre più naturale per l'uomo", L. Anceschi, *Le poetiche del Novecento in Italia*, p. 160. My translation.

¹⁶⁰ "il momento della purificazione del valore estetico dell'arte", L. Anceschi, *Autonomia ed eteronomia dell'arte*, p. 226. My translation.

privileging of the heteronomy pole, impairs Art's immanent capacity to offer a critical cognition of reality.¹⁶¹ According to Anceschi, for art to live up to its potential for critical cognition of external reality, the autonomy-heteronomy dialectic cannot be resolved by means of a total, non-dialectical, suppression of one of the two opposite poles:

in a first moment, art affirms its own necessity to be in a direct relationship with life, to be all life and reality, or only an aspect, so to say, extra-aesthetic, of it (by affirming its particular religious, political, moral etc functions): in a second moment, once these interpretations undergo a complete devaluation for the mutation of the overall direction of culture, it [art] feels the necessity to delineate its field of activity and, in the meantime, to expand it [...] there is always, close to the thesis, a residue of the antithetical position.¹⁶²

For Anceschi, such a dynamic has been constitutive of every artistic practice since Kant's ideas influenced the artist's (self) perception of his or her own practice, and thus, also in symbolist art, that is, also in *l'art pour l'art* literature, and the long essay *Autonomia ed eteronomia dell'arte* – with its lengthy analyses of the artistic activity and aesthetic reflections of Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire – is an attempt at proving that. More specifically, Anceschi carries out a heuristic distinction between the notion of *aesthetics* ('estetica') and that of *poetics* ('poetica'): the latter is the phenomenological manifestation of the re-elaboration of previous aesthetic concepts within the 'concrete' (formal) 'material' constraints that are peculiar to the historical development of the artistic form.¹⁶³ The

¹⁶¹ This is the same ground that makes Theodor Adorno privilege Modernism and not the movements of the historical avant-garde.

¹⁶² "in un primo momento, l'arte afferma la propria necessità di essere in rapporto diretto con la vita, di essere tutta la vita e la realtà, oppure un aspetto di essa, per così dire, extraestetico (affermandosi come avente particolari funzioni religiose, politiche, morali, ecc.): in un secondo momento, svalutate completamente queste interpretazioni per la mutazione di tutta la direzione della cultura, essa sente la necessità di delineare il proprio campo di attività e, insieme, di allargarlo: [...] c'è sempre, vicino alla tesi, un residuo della posizione antitetica", L. Anceschi, *Autonomia ed eteronomia dell'arte*, p. 224. My translation.

¹⁶³ The value of aesthetics as a "philosophical doctrine" can be judged on the ground of its ability to "develop new aspects of life, to understand it, and not on its ability to prevent the internal infinite movement always tending towards a revolution [...] of the already 'formed' values and paradigms", *ibid.*, p. 222. My translation. With Anceschi, the aesthetic domain undergoes a re-dimensioning determining the rejection of a dogmatic

invention of new formal techniques represents the artist's response to changing cultural and material co-ordinates determining the perception of the reality he lives in (heteronomy moment), and yet, it cannot be reduced to them. By the same token, although being mediated by the aesthetic reflections of the artist himself (as proved by the analysis of both the poetic and theoretical works of Poe and Baudelaire), formal innovation cannot be reduced to the aesthetic moment only.

Anceschi's phenomenological approach involves acceptance of the primacy of the notion of 'experience'.¹⁶⁴ Here, though, 'experience', is not related to Art and artistic tradition according to the terms of an antagonistic, mutually exclusive, relationship as is the case with Futurism: to the contrary, 'experience' (the perception of 'life' and the 'real') and 'tradition' are both understood by Anceschi, and also by the members of the neo-avant-garde, according to the terms of a dialectical dialogue at the roots of Art's continuous formal revolution.

II.II. The Neo-avant-garde's Dialectic Understanding of Literature

For the neo-avant-garde, Futurism, or 'avant-gardism' generally, epitomizes the loss of Art's cognitive potentials due to the resolution of the autonomy-heteronomy dichotomy – as constructed by Anceschi – in favour of a total surrender to the 'heteronomous' pole of art. As pointed out by Edoardo Sanguineti in 'La guerra futurista' (1968) – a half historical, half sociological essay – one of the problems inherent in the 'de-aestheticization' of artistic language which in Futurism is a consequence of the suppression of the hiatus between 'art' and 'life', is that such an operation lends and exposes itself to a full recuperation by and co-

approach to the artefact that may prevent the artist from creating new formal techniques on the one side and, on the other, the critic from understanding Art's continuous formal revolution.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Fausto Curi, 'Sulla giovane poesia', *Ordine e disordine*, pp. 76-7.

option within bourgeois dominant ideology. For Sanguineti, Futurism is an integral part of – and is to be explained within – the cultural environment of “pre-fascism” as an historical period preceding linearly and causally, and thus leading up to, the victory of fascism. The emerging trait profoundly characterizing that historical period is exactly “the apology of capitalism, that like in any pre-fascism (or better, “pre-fascisms”) tirelessly and punctually emerges in Marinetti even [when he is] at his most ‘democratic’.”¹⁶⁵ According to Sanguineti, Marinetti’s apology of capitalism is organically related to the ideologico-historical period paving the way to the fascist *regime*: the futurist “appeal to the youth as a class” and also to the “intellectuals as a reactionary *elite* avant-garde” can be seen as an anticipation of the propaganda strategy of the fascist regime, that is, Fascism’s systematic and organized attempt to seek support among the ranks of dissatisfied intellectuals coming from the *petite bourgeoisie*.¹⁶⁶

“[T]he issue [that] is central in Marinetti and in all cultural politics of fascism is to be found in the aesthetic apology of war [and in the] aestheticization of politics [...]”.¹⁶⁷ The historical trajectory of Futurism as an ‘ideology’ that is first confined within the literary field and that, in a subsequent moment, is fully co-opted and deployed by fascism in the form of a powerfully self-legitimizing rhetoric serving as a vehicle for the propaganda of war and colonialism is nothing else but further confirmation of “Benjamin’s superb diagnosis” that “All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war. War and war only can set

¹⁶⁵ “l’apologetica del capitalismo, che, come tutto il prefascismo (o meglio sempre, i ‘prefascismi’), non si stanca di emergere puntualmente anche nel Marinetti più ‘democratico’”, E. Sanguineti, ‘La guerra futurista’, *Ideologia e linguaggio*, p. 37. My translation.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* Sanguineti here is quite right: indeed, the cultural policy of fascism proved to be a fertile ground for the *ceto intellettuale*’s yearning for social distinction. As Roberto Campagnano points out, it is with fascism that, “for the first time in history, Italian intellectuals are forced by the mechanisms put in motion by the state [that is, the corporatist state] to posit themselves in front of the political interlocutor as a social subject and not as single individuals.” R. A. Campagnano, ‘Istituti e associazioni di cultura nel Novecento’, p. 1021.

¹⁶⁷ “nell’apologia estetica della guerra [...] e nell’estetizzazione della politica [risiede] il nodo centrale di Marinetti e di tutta la politica culturale del fascismo”, E. Sanguineti, ‘La guerra futurista’, *Ideologia e linguaggio*, p. 39. My translation.

a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting the traditional property system".¹⁶⁸ For Sanguineti, any attempt to propose even a partial recuperation of Futurism, that is, to put it within the framework of a potentially oppositional project by severing it from its actual constitutive relationship with the bourgeois order – and, *as a consequence*, with fascism – would be an act of historical falsification: it is exactly the apology of capitalism of the Futurist movement that acts as a mediating moment allowing for its later subsumption, co-option and instrumentalization within fascism.

The futurist ‘false sublation’ of art is materialistically understood by the Italian neo-avant-garde as a phenomenon that – far from being naively considered as a derangement and negative exception within avant-garde art – is actually dependent upon, and a direct consequence of, the structural link between avant-garde art as an overall phenomenon and bourgeois society. As Sanguineti puts it, “the avant-garde is a typically and exclusively bourgeois phenomenon [...that is] relative to the economic conditions in which the history of bourgeois art develops and culminates, and as a consequence [relative] to the economic conditions of perfectly developed bourgeois society”.¹⁶⁹ Avant-garde art is a consequence of bourgeois society because it emerges from the general network of social relations as they are reflected in the conditions of the art-market. According to Sanguineti, if, on the one side, the trajectory of Futurism can be considered as the *immediate* and non-oppositional, on an ideological level, consequence of bourgeois society, on the other, avant-garde art as an overall phenomenon “definitively isn’t the mechanic expression [espressione

¹⁶⁸ W. Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, *Illuminations*, p. 234.

¹⁶⁹ “l’avanguardia è un fenomeno tipicamente ed esclusivamente borghese [...] relativo alle condizioni economiche in cui si sviluppa e giunge a maturazione la storia dell’arte borghese, e dunque alle condizioni economiche della società borghese perfettamente sviluppata”, E. Sanguineti, ‘Avanguardia, società, impegno,’ *Ideologia e linguaggio*, p. 60. My translation.

meccanicamente data] of the bourgeois class in power".¹⁷⁰ Despite the fact that *all* avant-garde art is the immediate consequence of bourgeois society to which it is linked "by solid homology, or in other words, structurally",¹⁷¹ an ideologically conscious, politically correct avant-gardiste practice is still possible and can still affirm itself as the contradictory moment denying the relations of power it stems from.

A politically correct avant-gardiste practice is thus a form of self-contradiction (and negative dialectical moment) that is internal to bourgeois society. As opposed to Futurism, it is the moment of utmost denial of the very system from which it originates. "[A]t its origin, the avant-garde constitutes itself in the form of protest"¹⁷² internal to the art-market that reflects bourgeois logic. By denying the logic of the market, avant-garde art posits itself against bourgeois logic at large. "Because of its arising from the aesthetic terrain such protest immediately calls into question the overall structure of social relations".¹⁷³ 'Aesthetic protest' is, by homology, a form of social protest: the external protest, "its economic-social aspect is interiorized by the aesthetic aspect itself".¹⁷⁴ The problem of the modality of the *interiorization* and *internalization* of the social protest against the 'economic-social aspect' into 'the aesthetic aspect', that is, the modality of the relationship between *language* and (the dominant) *ideology* is the fundamental issue that that needs to be used as an evaluative ground and assessment-tool for avant-garde art as an overall phenomenon.

The subsumption into dominant ideology (that is, the ideology of Fascism-capitalism) of Futurist aesthetics is proof of the superficiality of the Futurist *external* linguistic protest: despite being supported by a seemingly different analysis (Sanguinetti is a

¹⁷⁰ "non è per nulla espressione, meccanicamente data, della classe borghese a potere", *ibid.* My translation.

¹⁷¹ "per solida omologia, strutturalmente insomma", *ibid.*, p. 63. My translation.

¹⁷² "l'avanguardia si costituisce, alle radici, nella forma della contestazione", *ibid.*, p. 62. My translation.

¹⁷³ "tale contestazione, nell'atto stesso in cui si genera sul terreno estetico, mette in causa, immediatamente, la struttura tutta dei rapporti sociali", *ibid.*, p. 63. My translation.

¹⁷⁴ "interiorizzata, in quello che è l'aspetto economico-sociale, dall'aspetto estetico stesso", *ibid.* My translation.

Marxist, Guglielmi is not), the terms of Sanguineti's condemnation of Futurism are a further confirmation of Guglielmi's. Sanguineti's position is taken in and re-elaborated by Fausto Curi.

For Curi also, avant-garde art is a negative moment internal to bourgeois dialectic: "The origin of the avant-garde coincides with the moment of increasing coercive expansion of the bourgeois world", ¹⁷⁵ i.e. "avant-garde art is the product of capitalistic society", ¹⁷⁶ and yet "only those who stupidly sustain an anti-dialectic vision have not understood yet that, in so far as avant-garde art is structurally connected *per contraddizione* with the bourgeoisie, contradiction is the very foundation of the avant-garde".¹⁷⁷ It makes no sense, thus, to talk about "contradictions, or [...] 'aporias' of the avant-garde": ¹⁷⁸ this theoretical position misses the dialectic inherent in it. Avant-garde art as a politically 'correct' practice is a dialectical phenomenon: it unfolds itself as a direct consequence of capitalistic expansion and, at the same time, as the antithetical reaction against that very expansion. The final moment of the dialectic consists in the modality in which the antithetical moment (the artist's rebellion) undergoes a crystallization – or, to use Sanguineti's term, 'interiorization' – on the aesthetic level that, by means of "the supreme effort to go beyond the alienation of the poetic word by radically modifying its status [carries out] the supreme

¹⁷⁵ "l'origine dell'avanguardia corrisponde con un momento di particolare espansione coercitiva del mondo borghese", F. Curi, 'Tesi per una storia dell'avanguardia', in *Gruppo 63: Critica*, p. 320. My translation.

¹⁷⁶ "l'arte d'avanguardia è un prodotto della società capitalistica", F. Curi, *Perdita d'aureola*, p. 13. My translation.

¹⁷⁷ "soltanto chi si ostini in una visione stolidamente antidialettica può non avere ancora capito che nella misura in cui l'arte d'avanguardia è strutturalmente collegata *per contraddizione* con la borghesia, la contraddizione è il fondamento stesso dell'arte d'avanguardia", *ibid.*, author's italics. My translation.

¹⁷⁸ "contraddizioni [...] o 'aporie' dell'avanguardia", *ibid.* My translation.

and desperate attempt to transfer the dis-alienating revolt from the word [that is, from the aesthetic level, back again] to life”,¹⁷⁹ that is, to the social level.

The neo-avant-garde’s considerations on a correct avant-gardist practice that is entirely circumscribed within the boundaries of the aesthetic and that yet claims to have an impact upon Man’s social consciousness and ‘vision of the world’ – a practice that from now on will be defined as *sperimentalismo* (experimentalism) – are gauged against Futurism and Marinetti. The latter cunningly realizes that the production of Art is inescapably subordinated to the rules of the market, and that it is subject to a kind of consumption that pushes it towards a continuous output of novel projects and new formal models in order to keep up with the expectations of the mass of buyers: “Marinetti knows well that art is, in the Baudelairean sense, prostitution but unlike Baudelaire, who exploits the structures offered by the capitalist market to introduce substantially anti-capitalistic goods, he zealously satisfies the expectations of public that is linked to imperialist industry”.¹⁸⁰ With Marinetti, “the linguistic sign is degraded into the mimetic instrument of phenomenic reality”.¹⁸¹

Curi is here re-stating Anceschi’s observations on Futurism while pushing them to their ideological conclusion: the Futurist’s abolition of the barrier between ‘art’ and ‘life’ and the unmediated merging of ‘writing’ with ‘matter’, presents, as a corollary, the fact that the Futurist mitopoietic fascination for technological progress does not allow for acts of self-consciousness and critical awareness of the real. What is more interesting though, is Curi’s materialistic re-elaboration, via Benjamin, of the immoral anti-bourgeois values conveyed by

¹⁷⁹ “il supremo sforzo di superare l’alienazione della parola poetica modificandone lo radicalmente lo *status* [fa] il tentativo supremo e disperato di trasferire dalla parola all vita la rivolta disalienante”, *ibid.*, p. 23. My translation.

¹⁸⁰ “Marinetti sa bene che l’arte e’ in senso baudelaireano , prostituzione; ma Baudelaire si serve della struttura del mercato capitalistico per introdurre una merce sostanzialmente anticapitalistica, Marinetti asseconda con zelo le attese del pubblico in varia misura legato all’industria imperialista”, *ibid.*, p. xiii. My translation.

¹⁸¹ “degradazione del segno linguistico a strumento mimetico della realtà fenomenica”, *ibid.*, p. xiv. My translation.

Baudelaire's poetry. Marinetti's ineffectual *external* revolt and Baudelaire's *internal* (textual) rebellion are here envisaged as two diametrically opposed examples of avant-gardist practice:

The perfidy and ambiguity of the oxymoron constituting Baudelaire's masterpiece is the symbol of an art founded on fraud that, while keeping on proposing itself as 'poetry', actually communicates to its bourgeois public the feverish sense of a life that is intoxicated and inebriated [... and] slowly insinuates in their brains a lucid and estrangeing visual delirium [...that] the market converts, despite itself, into an antagonistic communicative process.¹⁸²

The intoxication and inebriation the artist sells to the public as "poetry" stems, according to Walter Benjamin, from the of commodification of the man of letters in capitalist society:

The *flâneur* is someone abandoned in the crowd. In this he shares the situation of the commodity. He is not aware of this special situation, but this does not diminish its effects on him and it permeates him blissfully like a narcotic that compensates him for many humiliations. The intoxication to which the *flâneur* surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of consumers.¹⁸³

With Baudelaire, the objective situation of the man of letters within capitalist society reaches the moment of utmost clarity even in terms of the artist's self-perception as "he frequently compared such a man, and especially himself, with a whore":¹⁸⁴ The man of letters "goes to the market as a *flâneur*, supposedly to take a look at it, but in reality, to find a buyer".¹⁸⁵ What is here referred to as the "prostitution" of the man of letters or, to use other words, his 'emasculatation' or 'proletarianization,' is a consequence of the events following 1848 in France, a date marking the beginning of the perceived social decay of the man of letters, that

¹⁸² "la perfida ambiguità dell'ossimoro che costituisce il titolo del capolavoro baudelairiano è il simbolo di un'arte fondata sulla frode, che mentre continua a proporsi come 'poesia' comunica di fatto al pubblico borghese il senso febbrile di una vita intossicata e inebriata [...] che insinua a poco a poco nel suo cervello un lucido e straniante delirio visivo", *ibid.*, p. x. My translation.

¹⁸³ W. Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, 1973, p. 55.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

is, his loss of the social mandate that was once conferred on him by a previously revolutionary bourgeoisie.

The argument of the devaluation of the post 1848 man of letters is important for an historical understanding of avant-garde art and for this reason, it will be explained further. Its relevance, though, should not deceive us about the gender dynamics it implicitly relies on and discursively re-enacts: the equation of a devaluation in status with the process of emasculation, prostitution and commodification relies on identifying what is devalued with *woman*. The “imaginary male femininity”¹⁸⁶ of the ‘prostitute’ ‘whore’ metaphor shows us that gender expresses value and that the shift of the *man* of letters’ identity towards the feminine metaphorically signals his loss of prestige. Andreas Huyssen has pointed out that the identification of the devalued – low status, *lower* cultural forms and ultimately the whole of popular culture – with woman is at the core of modernism and its phantasy of self-definition in relation to its hidden Other – mass culture. I take a stance on modernism’s gender dynamics in the final chapter of the present work.

The nostalgic view that, before 1848, writers and critics were inside the process of history, active participants struggling to make sense of it and *narrate* it, and that afterwards they became observers and salaried members of the system and were content to *describe* the world,¹⁸⁷ leads Georg Lukács to envisage as sheer delusion the artist’s claim to have an impact on social life by means of his artistic activity only, that is, by means of an “abstract emphasis of [stylistic] difference alone”.¹⁸⁸ For Lukács, avant-garde art is a historically necessary novel style, the necessary expression of Modernity’s decline, but style alone fails to be *formally* meaningful: hence Lukács’ condemnation of both avant-garde art

¹⁸⁶ A. Huyssen, ‘Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other’, *After the Great Divide*, p. 49.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Forgacs, ‘Marxist Literary Theories,’ p. 173.

¹⁸⁸ G. Lukács, ‘The Writer and the Critic’, *Writer and Critic*, p. 202.

and Modernism (Lukács uses the two terms interchangeably): “necessity can also be necessity for the artistically false, distorted and corrupt”.¹⁸⁹ It may be clear by now that when referring to “those who stupidly sustain an anti-dialectic vision”¹⁹⁰ of the avant-garde, Curi is attacking the faction of the older left-oriented intellectuals. What needs to be stressed, though, is that he is doing so by both drawing from Benjamin and actually addressing and working upon a problematic that is originally Lukács’s: once the writer has lost his social mandate, that is, the opportunity to have an impact upon social and political life, all that is left to him is to

make [...] a business out of his inner life. Even if he does not make a complete vocational adjustment to day-by-day demands of the capitalistic book market like most other writers, even if he offers stubborn personal resistance to the market and its demands, his relationship to life and thus to art is restricted and distorted as compared to that of writers of former times.¹⁹¹

What seemed an exercise in literary history turns out to be the analysis of Baudelaire’s trajectory as the genealogical antecedent that is instrumental for the understanding, in a materialistic sense, of the motives of the *novissimi* poets and of the Italian neo-avant-garde. The comparison between the situation of the writer in post-1848 France (as described by Lukács) and the one in post-war Italy is finally made explicit: if it is true that, “only the scrutiny of the structural roots of [the avant-garde as a phenomenon] can allow for a full dialectical understanding”,¹⁹² then the ‘prostitution’, ‘emasculatation’ or ‘commodification’ of the man of letters is at the root of the Italian neo-avant-garde too. With Baudelaire, the “act of

¹⁸⁹ G. Lukács, ‘Narrate or Describe?’, *Writer and Critic*, p. 119.

¹⁹⁰ See above.

¹⁹¹ G. Lukács, ‘The Writer and the Critic’, *Writer and Critic*, pp. 189-90.

¹⁹² “in particolare, un’attenzione alle radici strutturali dei fenomeni [...] è la sola capace di consentirne una piena comprensione dialettica”, F. Curi, *Perdita d’aureola*, p. 21.

insubordination towards his class of origin is not followed by the choice of a new class", ¹⁹³ just as is the case for the Italian neo-avant-garde. If it is true that, as Lukács argues, the writer is historically incapacitated to take part actively and directly in social life, then any claim to do so in an 'immediate' way becomes a rather unrealistic and naïve pretension: "today, only a rather childish extremism [...] can delude itself to get out of the contradiction"¹⁹⁴ by means of the denial of the actual reason that is at its very root: the writer's idealistic aspirations are denied by the "material praxis" and "intellectuals have the task to make a distinction between real and abstract contradictions and to fasten their work to the former".¹⁹⁵ Baudelaire was the first artist to realize that the bourgeoisie was about to withdraw its commission to the poet: "the modern intellectual suffers his first serious trauma and, in the meantime he verifies the capacity to convert his trauma into a transgressive operation".¹⁹⁶

What Curi is suggesting can be also put as follows: the artist's revolt is first 'interiorized' on the aesthetic level where it carries out a "dis-alienation" of the poetic word (that is, the dis-alienation of artistic language meant as an institution that is separated from common, everyday, means-ends language). By "dis-alienation" Curi means a sort of "integral redemption" of language as an artistic medium: such a redemption is meant "both as the acquisition of the semantic purity and functionality of the linguistic institute and as absolute cognitive clarity and, as a consequence, as the disclosure and recuperation of the authentic

¹⁹³ "all'insubordinazione nei confronti della classe d'origine non si accompagna [...] la scelta di una nuova classe", *ibid.*, p. 9. My translation.

¹⁹⁴ "soltanto un estremismo davvero infantile, che è esso stesso [...] può illudersi, oggi, di uscire dalla contraddizione", *ibid.*, p. 13. My translation.

¹⁹⁵ "agli intellettuali spetta il compito di distinguere fra contraddizioni reali e contraddizioni astratte e di legare alle prime il proprio lavoro", *ibid.*, p. 14. My translation.

¹⁹⁶ "l'intellettuale moderno patisce il suo primo grave trauma, e insieme verifica la capacità di convertirlo in trasgressione operativa", *ibid.*, p. 9. My translation.

structures of the real".¹⁹⁷ The moment of socialization and fruition of the aesthetic construct, where the revolt has been internalized, functions as the mediating moment: the sense of revolt that is expressed on the aesthetic level is dialectically passed on to the recipient. Within such a conception, the intellectual engagement is engagement with form: "engagement with the word, the redemption of the word become engagement with man, redemption of man. The moment of utmost autonomy of art is, in fact, the moment of art's utmost assumption of responsibility. This is inclusive autonomy".¹⁹⁸ The artist's 'social' protest, the rejection of the social mandate that was once conferred to him by the bourgeoisie, is internalized on the formal level of the aesthetic construct that will undergo fruition and socialization *qua* aesthetic artefact: its fruition will be confined within the realm of art as a separate institution. And yet, such a socialization will be sustained by the very ideological protest from which the aesthetic construct stems. The recipient's 'vision of the world' could – and indeed, *should* – be affected by the ideological revolt that is the origin of the artefact.

The fundamental point that needs to be stressed is this: the kind of (dialectical) mediation here suggested by Curi is possible only within a conception of the Art world meant as a separate institution that is based on the refusal to conflate of 'art' with 'life'. While articulating the notion of experimentalism as 'correct' oppositional literature – Curi is restating both Anceschi's and Guglielmi's strong doubts on the viability of the project of the historical avant-garde.

If envisaged within a materialistic vision, what Curi is suggesting can also be put as follows: the artist *qua* artist is structurally linked to the market and, as a consequence,

¹⁹⁷ "riacquisizione della purezza semantica e della funzionalità degli istituti linguistici, sia come assoluta chiarezza conoscitiva, e dunque come disoccultamento e ricupero delle strutture autentiche del reale", F. Curi, 'Tesi per una storia delle avanguardie', in *Gruppo 63: Critica e teoria*, p. 321. My translation.

¹⁹⁸ "L'impegno sulla parola, il riscatto della parola, tendono a farsi impegno sull'uomo, riscatto dell'uomo. Il momento di massima autonomia dell'arte risulta così, di fatto, il momento di massima assunzione di responsabilità da parte dell'arte. Si tratta di un'autonomia inclusiva", F. Curi, 'Tesi per una storia delle avanguardie', in *Gruppo 63: Critica e teoria*, p. 321. My translation.

so is any artistic product (this is, by and large, an originally Adornian position). And yet, potentially, the market can be consciously and subversively used as a vehicle propagating a utopian project: *despite* its structural determination, the market *can* actually promote and disseminate “a new semantic circuit or, a new semantic sociality”.¹⁹⁹ The optimism inherent in such a position is an appreciable move away from Theodor Adorno (and as we will see in the next chapter, this *voluntaristic* optimism is also at the base of Umberto Eco’s formulation of the *open work*):

When a writer transforms a subversive literary operation, or the cessation of any literary operativeness, into a socially practicable model, he puts into question not only the system of the rhetorico-ideological codes used by the bourgeoisie, but also its very praxis, that is, the capitalistic mode of production, and once the writer has rejected his own mandate, he converts the a-sociality that derives from his refusal into a project of desperately anarchic and nihilistic praxis.²⁰⁰

The a-sociality of the aesthetic construct, its refusal to take part into every-day language and to communicate a clear, straightforward message to the recipient, sabotages the means-ends rationality of commodified forms of everyday language and communication – the newspapers and other lower, functional, all too easily understandable forms of culture. The semantic a-sociality of the aesthetic construct sabotages, from within, the rationality sustaining capitalistic society, its socialization of culture through language: the artist’s social engagement is acted out entirely on the semantic level, within the boundaries of the aesthetic.

¹⁹⁹ “un nuovo circuito semantico, o, se si preferisce, una nuova socialità semantica”, F. Curi, *Perdita d’aureola*, pp. 252-3. My translation.

²⁰⁰ “Nel momento in cui uno scrittore fa di un’operazione letteraria eversiva, o della cessazione di ogni operatività letteraria, un modello socialmente praticabile, egli mette infatti in questione, prima ancora del sistema di codici retorico-ideologici di cui si giova la borghesia, la stessa prassi borghese, cioè il modo di produzione capitalistico, e rifiutato il proprio mandato, converte l’asocialità che deriva dal rifiuto in un progetto di prassi anarchica e nichilistica disperatamente alternativo”, *ibid.*, pp. 18-9. My translation.

The consequences of the a re-elaboration, in a ‘historico-materialistic’ sense, of the tenets of Anceschi’s *Autonomia ed eteronomia dell’arte*, cannot be underestimated: the potential for social antagonism of the aesthetic construct gathers momentum from the social revolt that is at its origin and that informs it. That aesthetic construct expresses fully the terms of artist’s actual stance in relation to the dominant ideology, that is, his rejection of the social mandate that was once conferred to him by the bourgeoisie. The a-sociality of the artefact expresses the artist’s refusal to serve the self-legitimizing bourgeois socialization of culture. If the artist’s social protest is fully conveyed and expressed by the aesthetic construct the oppositionality of which is socialized by the market despite its structural determination, the artist’s political engagement becomes a superfluous, if not mystifying, act.

The writer’s revolt undergoes a ‘formalization’ and ‘aestheticization’ and is entirely acted out as ‘textual practice’: in Umberto Eco’s words, the artist’s way of forming is engagement upon reality as “the artist carries out his or her protest within the structures of his own work”.²⁰¹ This is so because of the deeply dialectical interplay sustaining the relationship between art and reality. Also according to Eco, the meaning of experimentalism (meant as a correct avant-garde practice) is deeply dialectical as the protest played out on the level of art’s structures is actually a protest against the social values reflected in these structures. Eco makes this point clear in *Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà* where the atonal musician epitomizes the experimental artist: “The musician rejects the tonal system because it now transposes on the level of structural relationships *a whole way of seeing the world and a way of being in the world*”.²⁰² Eco warns that a rejection of art in favour of a social political practice would be unthinkable: the artist’s “situation [...] is simply

²⁰¹ U. Eco, ‘Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà’, *Opera aperta*, p. 263. My translation.

²⁰² “Il musicista rifiuta il sistema tonale perché esso trasporta sul piano dei rapporti strutturali *tutto un modo di vedere il mondo e un modo di essere nel mondo*”, *ibid.*, p. 260. My translation.

dialectical: that is, it cannot be resolved by simply eliminating one of the two poles. And *the absurd* is but the dialectical situation as seen by a masochist".²⁰³ The neo-avant-garde's experimentalism seems to be consistently rooted in dialectical thought.

III. Experimentalism: The Cognitive Value of Literature.

In the inaugural discourse opening the publication of *il Verri* in 1956, Anceschi envisages the foundation of a journal that will act, in the years to come, as a springboard for the young members of the neo-avant-garde, as a defence of literature that is provoked and made necessary by 'the spirit of the time,' that is, the widespread disregard of the intrinsic value of literature, and especially, of poetry:

The foundation of a 'journal of literature' seems nowadays a certainly unpopular, if not reckless and, for many reasons, difficult, undertaking. The present century has been long proclaiming against literature; other more pressing problems are supposed to concern us; and even our enquiries into the state of fiction, poetry and criticism seem to be an indiscreet, or better evasive and idle, gesture.²⁰⁴

By defending "poetry and literature" as "activities that are fully worthy of man, second to no other activity, so much so that they deserve an attention that is direct, not tortuously deviated and falsified",²⁰⁵ Anceschi is re-stating the philosophical premise informing his *Autonomia ed eteronomia dell'arte*. And yet, far from appearing as 'abstract', almost 'a-temporal' speculations circumscribed within the aesthetic realm, these premise are here endowed with

²⁰³ "situazione [...] è di fatto semplicemente *dialettica*: cioè, non può essere risolta eliminando semplicemente uno dei suoi poli. E l'*assurdo* non è che la situazione dialettica vista da un masochista", *ibid.*, p. 260. My translation.

²⁰⁴ "Il proposito di dar vita a una 'rivista di letteratura' sembra oggi impresa, se non a dirittura temeraria, certo impopolare e per molte ragioni difficile. C'è nel secolo una diffusa proclamazione contro la letteratura; altri interessi premono, si dice; e perfino il domandarci quale sia lo stato delle cose nella narrativa, nella poesia, nella critica sembra gesto indiscreto, anzi evasivo e ozioso". L. Anceschi, 'Discorso generale', *Verri*, 1, Autumn 1956. Reprinted in *Gruppo 63: Critica e teoria*, p. 239. My translation.

²⁰⁵ "attività non seconde a nessuna altra attività, del tutto degne dell'uomo, tali, anzi, che dedicare a esse una attenzione diretta, non tortuosamente deviata e falsata", *ibid.* My translation.

renewed cogency and historical urgency by Anceschi's implicit reference to the issues that were raging in the post-war period, that is, the issue of the subordination of literature to the political in the debate over neo-realism as the only literary practice able fully to convey and express the writer's ideological engagement with reality and the social.

The foundation of *il Verri* testifies to a deeply felt necessity for a renewed and direct interest in 'literature' *per se*, and it is perceived as an "act that is as necessary as, and as a consequence, no less urgent than, the resolution of any other problem that may pertain not only to the philosophical and the moral sphere, but also to the social, economic and political spheres".²⁰⁶ For Anceschi, "[t]he friends who set-up the society of 'il Verri' and that contribute to its publications are aware [...] of the present situation and respect it";²⁰⁷ exactly because of their maintaining "that literature lives only by fully partaking in the wide system of changing relations where all the meanings of Time become concrete, [and that] actually literature plays a part in the formation of those meanings",²⁰⁸ they can have an understanding of the motivation that may lead some to depreciate the importance of literature in favour of more practice-oriented aspects of life that may appear to be more compelling and urgent. And yet, ultimately, "literature is responsible for itself, *it has its own way of seeing*".²⁰⁹

Anceschi's defence of the relative autonomy of literature is, according to Remo Ceserani, "full of common sense and manages to accommodate a noticeable degree of historical relativism (or phenomenological 'perspectivism')".²¹⁰ And yet, some of its

²⁰⁶ "atto almeno altrettanto necessario quanto risolvere qualsiasi altro problema, non diciamo solo filosofico e morale, ma anche sociale, economico e politico", *ibid.* My translation.

²⁰⁷ "Gli amici che han costituito la società del 'Verri' e che contribuiscono alla pubblicazione di questa rivista si rendono conto di tale stato, e dei suoi motivi, e della presente situazione, e ne han rispetto", *ibid.* My translation.

²⁰⁸ "che la letteratura vive solo in una partecipazione piena dell'amplissimo sistema delle mutevoli relazioni in cui, volta a volta, si attuano tutti i significati del tempo, anzi proprio tali significati essa, nei suoi modi, contribuisce a formare", *ibid.* My translation.

²⁰⁹ "la letteratura risponde di sé, *ha un suo modo di vedere*", *ibid.* My translation.

²¹⁰ "piena di buon senso ed è sufficiente a produrre un notevole relativismo storico (o propsettivismo fenomenologico)", R. Ceserani, *Guida allo studio della letteratura*, p. 27. My translation.

legitimate premises will be pushed to their extreme consequences by the younger co-funders of and contributors to *il Verri*, and will also undergo an increasingly thorough and consistent radicalization characterised, at times, by distinctive ‘apocalyptic’ connotations. The neo-avant-garde’s discursive radicalization of an initially legitimate defence of the “autonomy of art”, that is, of “its incontrovertible material existence”,²¹¹ is provoked, justified and legitimized by a deeply perceived ‘epochal crisis’ of literary language as an institution triggered by the interplay of both ‘structural’ and ideological changes. According to the neo-avant-garde’s rhetorical re-construction of the terms and reasons causing the almost unredeemable crisis and demanding immediate and up-to-date measures, the role played by ‘structural’ constraints ‘external’ to the field of cultural production (the exasperating degree of ‘heteronomy’ reached because of the *culture industry*’s systematic commodification of language) is just as negative and ‘deleterious’ as the pivotal one played by ideological causes actually stemming from within the very heart of the field. In other words, the crisis is also the consequence of the ‘heteronomous’, ideological, ‘practical’ and, finally, political uses literature has been systematically put to by the previous generation of left-oriented intellectuals and writers. Renato Barilli deplores the fact that the question of “heteronomism” (*eteronomismo*), that is, “the primacy granted to practical reason has had deleterious effects upon post-war culture”:²¹² “We reproach the generation of Italian intellectuals preceding us for [...] the myth of activism, [the belief in] the superiority of the economico-practical level”,²¹³ and also for “that vulgar vice usually defined as *contenutismo* [the privileging content

²¹¹ “l’incontrovertibile esistenza materiale”, R. Barilli, ‘Quale impegno?’, in *Gruppo 63: Critica e teoria*, p. 314. My translation.

²¹² “il primato riconosciuto alla ragione pratica ha avuto effetti deleteri sulla cultura post-bellica”, *ibid.*, p. 316. My translation.

²¹³ “Il rimprovero che muoviamo agli intellettuali italiani della generazione che ha preceduto è di [...] aver coltivato il mito dell’attivismo, della superiorità dell’ambito pratico-economico”, *ibid.*, p. 315. My translation.

over form]”.²¹⁴ Those writers and intellectuals “wanted to see ‘mirrored’ in a novel or in a poem structures that had been actually devised for politics and economy”.²¹⁵ Instead of envisaging literature within the terms of a productively synergetic relationship with other philosophical and scientific disciplines; instead of trying to understand literature as a concrete phenomenon pertinent to our way of “*seeing*, knowing and feeling”²¹⁶ the world and external reality, they have a priori denounced its uselessness as a practice when and if not immediately related to political praxis. And yet, according to Barilli and the neo-avant-garde, the meaning of the notion of “praxis” goes well beyond the scope of the writer’s political belief and immediate term political action and orientation: for the writer and the artist, also “to see, to solve a problem, to experience a feeling, are instances of praxis as they imply action upon the world and have, more or less directly, operative consequences”.²¹⁷

It is exactly over the questions of intellectual *impegno* (i.e. engagement), of the modality in which the intellectual qua writer is to express, carry out and “give form” to her or his engagement upon society and reality and, as a consequence, of the very function and role of literature and art in contemporary society, that the differences setting apart the neo-avant-garde from that older generation of engaged, left-oriented intellectuals seem to become insurmountable. Although running the risk of over-exemplifying both the variety of individual positions and ideas giving rise to the lively – if not, at times, exacerbated – post-war debate on intellectual engagement and the neo-avant-garde’s stance within it, what differentiates the latter from that older generation of intellectuals is the firm belief in the necessity that the writer’s engagement be entirely acted out within the terms of a textual

²¹⁴ “quel vizio volgare cui si suol dare il nome di contenutismo”, *ibid.*, p. 318. My translation.

²¹⁵ “hanno voluto veder ‘riflesse’, in un romanzo o in un poemetto, le strutture approntate per la politica o per l’economia”, *ibid.*, p. 317. My translation.

²¹⁶ “al vedere, al conoscere, al sentire”, *ibid.* My translation.

²¹⁷ “Anche il vedere, risolvere un problema, il provare un sentimento rientrano nella prassi, implicano un’azione sul mondo, hanno più o meno direttamente conseguenze operative”, *ibid.*, p. 315. My translation.

practice and strategy that is to be conceived of and elaborated according to the specificity of both writing as a formative process and of literature as a tradition and a separate institution. The writer's engagement is entirely confined, at least in the first instance, within the boundaries of the formative process giving shape to the textual artefact, and yet, in a way, it also transcends and works beyond them: once the writer's engagement has been internalized on a textual/formal level, the socialization, via the market, and final fruition of the text/artefact will ensure that the engagement informing it will finally be propagated, socialized and passed on to the reading subject.

Before analysing the specific, formal modalities of the neo-avant-garde's textual praxis, the critic should try to understand the reasons and motivations at its roots. Instead of being condemned as sheer naivety or worse, opportunism, the voluntaristic utopianism motivating the neo-avant-garde's shift of the notion of *impegno* from 'political praxis' to 'textual praxis' is to be explained as a consequence of their unanimous refusal to give rise to a 'repetition' of 'avant-gardism' on the one hand and, on the other, as a reaction to the crisis of the notion of *impegno* as conveyed by neo-realistic aesthetics. Indeed, rather than reject *impegno*, the neo-avant-garde's stance seems to be to attempt to re-work polemically and problematize the possibility for political engagement after the advent of *mass society*.

Jennifer Burns suggests that "a useful way into the multiform question of *impegno* is via terminology".²¹⁸ When, in their theoretical works, both Elio Vittorini and Italo Calvino address and relate themselves to that imaginary *Other* 'legitimising' their activity as engaged writers, they both use and are still relatively at ease with the terms *società* (society) and *popolo* (people). Despite being fraught, especially in Calvino, with increasingly deeper complications, far from sounding simply rhetorical, those two terms still retain, or at

²¹⁸ J. Burns, *Fragments of Impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative. 1980-2000*, p. 15.

least, evoke, ideals and values stemming from the unrepeatable experience of the Resistance when, for a time, the man of letters was actually part of and merged with *the people* in the name of an action-oriented, progressive ideology. It is probably his experience as a very young partisan that will make Calvino as a writer deeply aware of the insufficiency and illusoriness of the notion of intellectual engagement meant as a way of knowing, recognizing, and understanding the world and objective reality and that will make him say that if “A hundred of years ago, there seemed to be a small leap between knowing the world and changing it; now it seems that any relationship between the two terms has been lost”.²¹⁹ As suggested by Burns, in Calvino, engagement meant as the artist’s objective knowledge of the world and reality “is equated with acquiescence rather than control”.²²⁰ This is not the case with the neo-avant-garde. Here, *realtà* (reality) seems to be the predominant term and operative word: as laconically and peremptorily stated by Angelo Guglielmi, “the recognition of reality [...] is the purpose of writing”;²²¹ this is re-stated by Umberto Eco’s point of view that “*an artist affects the world only by means of his or her way of forming his work*” (author’s italics).²²²

According to Angelo Guglielmi, “Language as an institution has entered a stage of definitive crisis” up to a point where a possible “recuperation concerns its function” only: “as an instrument [...it] has been tarnished forever. Any bridge between words and things has collapsed. Language [la lingua] meant as the representation of reality is, at this point, a mad

²¹⁹ “Tra conoscere il mondo e cambiarlo, cent’anni fa pareva ci fosse solo un breve salto; adesso pare si sia perso ogni rapporto fra i due termini”, I. Calvino, ‘Il mare dell’oggettività’, originally published in *Il menabò di letteratura*, n. 2, 1960. Reprinted in *Una pietra sopra*, p. 42. My translation.

²²⁰ J. Burns, *Fragments of Impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative. 1980-2000*, p. 15.

²²¹ “il riconoscimento della realtà rimane lo scopo dello scrivere”, A. Guglielmi, ‘Avanguardia e sperimentalismo’, in *Gruppo 63: Critica e teoria*, p. 331. My translation.

²²² “*un artista opera sul mondo solo attraverso il modo di formare la propria opera*”, U. Eco, ‘Avanguardia e sperimentalismo’, *La definizione dell’arte*, p. 246. My translation.

device".²²³ Guglielmi is saying that, because of the breakdown of its relationship and "dialectical interplay"²²⁴ with 'reality', 'language' has become only "apparently communicative".²²⁵ Its exhaustion as a mean of communication provokes an increasingly tangible awareness of the inherent deceptiveness and fallaciousness of its mimetic functions: "Today the real is not complex, it is chaotic; it is not rich, it is encrusted; it is not varied, it is entangled. In other words, it is not, or rather, it is alienated (estranged) by the ever new uses (interpretations) it undergoes".²²⁶ The exhaustion of the mimetic possibilities of language, that is, their perceived falsity, presents, as a corollary, the historical incapacity on the part of the subject to attain and articulate a truthful and objective knowledge of reality, that is, it determines the almost unredeemable alienation of the Subject from both History and "the real": "Never has man felt as if there were no future as he does today when future possibilities appear to be so striking and imminent thanks to the marvellous progress of science"²²⁷ The perceived alienation of the subject from language and, as a consequence, from reality, determines "the objective non-existence and incapacity of History"²²⁸ and "the impossibility of History".²²⁹ Guglielmi seems to envisage the real as both a kind of raw material whose ontology still waits to be discovered, and as a given that has been forever falsified by the countless ideological (discursive) uses that make its ontology unfathomable to the interpreting subject. And yet, according to Guglielmi, "the most appropriate intent the

²²³ "Entrato definitivamente in crisi l'istituto linguistico si pone il problema di tentarne il recupero. Naturalmente il recupero riguarda la funzione e non lo strumento. Lo strumento è per sempre logoro. Ogni ponte tra parola e cosa è crollato. La lingua è ormai un congegno matto", A. Guglielmi, 'Avanguardia e sperimentalismo', *Gruppo 63: Critica e teoria*, p. 331. My translation.

²²⁴ "giuoco dialettico", A. Guglielmi in 'Il dibattito', in *Gruppo 63: La nuova letteratura*, p. 377. My translation.

²²⁵ "apparentemente comunicativo", U. Eco, 'Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà', *Opera aperta*, p. 262. My translation.

²²⁶ "Il reale oggi non è complesso è caotico, non è ricco, è incrostato, non è vario è imbrogliato. Cioè non è, o meglio, è alienato (sviato) nei sempre nuovi usi (interpretazioni) cui è adibito", A. Guglielmi, 'Il dibattito', in *Gruppo 63: La nuova letteratura*, p. 378. My translation.

²²⁷ "Mai l'uomo si è sentito maggiormente senza futuro come oggi quando le possibilità di futuro, grazie al meraviglioso progresso della scienza, paiono tanto prossime e suggestive", *ibid.*, p. 377. My translation.

²²⁸ "inesistenza obiettiva e incapacità della Storia", *ibid.*, p. 376. My translation.

²²⁹ "l'impossibilità della Storia", *ibid.*, p. 376 and repeated on page 377. My translation.

writer can conceive of in relation to [the real] is to demystify it":²³⁰ the task of the writer has thus become almost impossible as, in 'normal' conditions, the subject's experience of the real is adapted to, distorted and falsified by the ideological constraints language – or better, the order of discourse – constantly imposes upon it.

According to Umberto Eco, the epochal crisis of the function of literary language as an institution is rooted in the chasm that sets apart the "universe in crisis" in which we live from the "orderly and untroubled universe we were used to think of".²³¹ The latter is definitively past, and yet its apparently clear and straightforward meaningfulness is constantly restated by the "order of words" we live with and by which we are acted upon: this *décalage* between 'language' and 'reality' is the cause of the crisis the contemporary writer feels thrown into. One may suggest that the perceived exhaustion of the mimetic function of language and the perceived impossibility of a relationship between 'language' and 'reality' free from ideological constraints – or, differently put, the perceived historical impossibility to conceive of language as the direct, immediate and truthful 'intuition' of reality – determines the downgrading of language itself to the status of 'discourse'.²³² And yet, this does not seem to be the point that is at stake here as, within Eco's premises, the notion of 'discourse' is not endowed with 'negative' connotations (that is, it does not seem to be related to a perceived impossibility to grasp the real in its ontological essence): to the contrary, "art's operation [...] is still the exercise of a reason that attempts to reduce things to their discursive clarity".²³³

²³⁰ "Tanto che l'intento più proprio che uno scrittore può concepire nei riguardi di esso [il reale] è di demistificarlo." *ibid.*, p. 378. My translation.

²³¹ "universo ordinato e tranquillo che ci eravamo abituati a pensare", U. Eco, 'Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà', *Opera aperta*, p. 263. My translation.

²³² As it is the case, for instance, in French post-structuralism, where such a crisis (i. e. the end of a humanistic episteme) is determined by the total identification between language on the one hand and, on the other, history and reality. Cf. especially M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*.

²³³ "l'operazione dell'arte [...] è ancora l'esercizio di una ragione che tenta di ridurre a chiarezza discorsiva le cose", U. Eco, 'Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà', *Opera aperta*, pp. 289-90. My translation.

For Eco, the problem is that language has become external to and “alienated” from reality in the sense that the representation of reality currently given by the formal organization of traditional linguistic structures seems to have lost the capacity formally to reproduce the material organization of reality itself. The crisis is not determined by the perceived inherent exhaustion of the mimetic function of language but by an epochal change external to language still struggling to find a formally convenient, appropriate and exhaustive organization and expression within the mimetic possibilities that, potentially, language still offers. The necessity for an up-date of the aesthetic ‘forms’ by means of which the subject understands, experiences and gives meaning to reality, is an historical one, and it is not confined within the “dialectics of innovation and tradition”²³⁴ entirely internal to literary language as an institution: such a deeply perceived necessity on the part of the contemporary artist, cannot be reduced to a question of dry formalism. The universe “in which we live”, says Eco,

[...] is a universe in crisis. It is in crisis because the order of words does not correspond any more to the order of things (words still articulate themselves by following a traditional order whereas science prompts us to see things configured according to [...] disorder and discontinuity); it is in crisis because the definition of feelings has become sclerotic and has been stereotyped into expressions and even ethical formulations that do not correspond to their actual reality; because the structure of phenomena as reproduced by language is no more the one according to which phenomena occur in the operative descriptions we produce; because the rules of social cohesion are based on paradigms that do not reproduce at all the actual imbalance of those relationships.²³⁵

²³⁴ “dialettica di invenzione e maniera”, *ibid.*, p. 257. My translation.

²³⁵ “È in crisi perchè all’ordine delle parole non corrisponde più un ordine delle cose (le parole si articolano ancora secondo l’ordine tradizionale mentre la scienza ci incita a vedere le cose disposte secondo altri ordini oppure addirittura secondo disordine e discontinuità); è in crisi perchè la definizione dei sentimenti quale si è sclerotizzata in espressioni stereotipe e nelle stesse formulazioni etiche non corrisponde alla loro realtà effettiva; perchè il linguaggio riproduce una struttura dei fenomeni che non è più quella con cui i fenomeni si presentano nelle descrizioni operative che ne diamo; perchè le regole di convivenza sociale si reggono su moduli d’ordine che non riproducono affatto lo squilibrio effettivo di questi rapporti.” *Ibid.*, p. 263. My translation.

The deeply felt necessity, on the part of the writer and of the artist generally, to up-date the formal means through which contemporary reality may find suitable representation is triggered by a radical change in the subject's perception and experience of contemporary reality, a change that – as in the case of Futurism – is brought about by the progress of science:

a literature that expresses in its open and indeterminate forms the vertiginous and hypothetical universes hazarded by the scientific imagination [...] would express [...] once again our relationship with the object of our knowledge, our restlessness with the form we have given to the world, or with the form we cannot give it; and would provide our imagination with paradigms instrumental to our understanding of science and technique.²³⁶

The task of literature is to 'mirror' within its "open forms" the radical openness, indeterminacy and relativity of the world as we know it through the epistemological mediation of science.

The centrality of the notion of 'form' seems to be the consequence of a critical and partial acceptance and re-thinking of the 'mirroring' (*wiederspiegeln*, rispecchiamento) function of literature as, according to Eco, it is not possible "to judge or describe a situation within the terms of a language that is not expressed by that situation, *because language mirrors a whole of relationships* and posits a system of subsequent implications" (my italics).

²³⁷ The artist is forced to act 'materially' upon the traditional organization of language and re-structure it according to new "open forms" and formal patterns; within the terms of such an

²³⁶ "Una letteratura che esprime nelle sue forme aperte e indeterminate gli universi vertiginosi e ipotetici azzardati dall'immaginazione scientifica si batte ancora sul terreno dell'umano [...] ancora una volta [...] esprimerebbe il nostro rapporto con l'oggetto della nostra conoscenza, la nostra inquietudine di fronte alla forma che abbiamo dato al mondo, o alla forma che non possiamo dargli; e lavorerebbe per provvedere alla immaginazione schemi senza la mediazione dei quali tutta una zona dell'attività tecnica e scientifica forse ci sfuggirebbe", *ibid.*, p. 289. My translation.

²³⁷ "non si può giudicare o descrivere una situazione nei termini di un linguaggio che non sia espresso da questa situazione, perchè il linguaggio rispecchia un insieme di rapporti e pone un sistema di implicazioni successive", *ibid.*, p. 268. My translation.

apparently disordered and chaotic re-organization, the artist's understanding and experience of, but also judgement upon, the new world can be – and indeed, should be – acted out. The artist is called to act upon language as a system, to rise in rebellion against its traditional structures and actively make new forms out of them.

The materiality implied by the notion of 'form' also involves a radical action-oriented attitude on the part of the artist: "the content of the work is the person of its creator that, at the same time, actively becomes form":²³⁸ only language that has been acted upon becomes form, that is, can be actually said to have been processed by the subject's experience. The latter undergoes an aesthetic re-organization and thus cannot be defined at all as 'instinctive', 'hurried' or artistically un-mediated. Indeed, it is only through the act of 'forming' that the subject can attain a true understanding and an epistemological experience of reality: "The artist that protests upon the forms has carried out a double operation: he has refused a system of forms without nevertheless nullifying it by token of that refusal; instead, he has acted on it from the inside".²³⁹ Indeed, the artist's act of detachment from, critical engagement with, and radical modification of the traditional system of forms, is based on partial acceptance of that traditional system: in order to act upon it, the artist "has accepted to partially alienate himself within it".²⁴⁰

The notion of 'form' seems to be far more central to Eco's understanding of the epistemological issues concerning literature than the more abstract implications of the notion of 'language'. This is because the scope for 'action', that is, artistically mediated critical and

²³⁸ "Contenuto dell'opera è la persona stessa del creatore la quale al tempo stesso si fa forma [...]", U. Eco, 'L'estetica della formatività e il concetto di interpretazione' (1955-1958), *La definizione dell'arte*, p. 13. My translation. Cf. Luigi Pareyson and especially Pareyson's *Estetica: Teoria della formatività*.

²³⁹ "l'artista che protesta sulle forme ha compiuto una duplice operazione: ha rifiutato un sistema di forme, e tuttavia non lo ha annullato nel suo rifiuto, ma ha agito al di dentro di esso", U. Eco, 'Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà', *Opera aperta*, p. 263. My translation.

²⁴⁰ "e quindi per sottrarsi a questo sistema e modificarlo ha tuttavia accettato di alienarsi in esso", *ibid.* My translation.

active revolt, can be (and actually should be) acted out entirely on the level of the forming process. On the one hand, the crisis of language as a system determines the subject's perception of his or her alienation from traditional expressive structures, (language being simply 'endured' by the subject in the sense that it has become external to the subject's actual experience of reality); and yet, on the other, the forming subject can still act upon the perceived alienation of language from reality: "by adopting [...] a project of permanent disorder [he or she can] accept[...] the world in which he lives within the terms of crisis in which the world itself is thrown".²⁴¹

The true *content* of the work becomes its *way of seeing the world* and of judging it resolved in *way of forming*: it is to the latter level that the discourse concerning the relationship between art and the world will have to be brought back. Art knows the world through its formative structures (that, as a consequence, are not its formalistic moment, but its true moment of content): literature organizes words that signify aspects of the world, but the literary work signifies, by itself, the world through the way in which the words have been arranged, even though these words, if singled out one by one, have no meaning at all [...] (*author's italics*).²⁴²

In his book *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale makes a relevant and widely accepted distinction between modernist and postmodernist narrative modes. According to McHale, while modernist fiction is concerned with cognitive questions such as "How can I interpret this world of which I am part? And what am I in it?" postmodernist fiction strategies engage with post-cognitive questions such as "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it? What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted and how do

²⁴¹ "adottando una nuova grammatica fatta non tanto di moduli d'ordine quanto di un progetto permanente di disordine, ha accettato proprio il mondo in cui vive nei termini di crisi in cui esso si trova", *ibid.* My translation.

²⁴² "Il vero *contenuto* dell'opera diventa il suo *modo di vedere il mondo* e di giudicarlo, risolto in *modo di formare*, e a questo livello andrà condotto il discorso sui rapporti tra l'arte e il proprio mondo. L'arte conosce il mondo attraverso le proprie strutture formative (che quindi non sono il suo momento formalistico ma il suo vero momento di contenuto): la letteratura organizza parole che significano aspetti del mondo, ma l'opera letteraria significa in proprio il mondo attraverso il modo in cui queste parole sono disposte, anche se, prese una per una, significano cose prive di senso [...]", *ibid.*, p. 270. My translation.

they differ?'. What separates these two modes is a shift from the epistemological level to an ontological one, from *problems of knowing* to *modes of being*.²⁴³ The analysis and discussion of the theoretical debate of the neo-avant-garde here provided should be continued and elaborated further and possibly related to actual fictional works. Nevertheless, at least on a theoretical level and despite its partiality and limitations, this first survey does suggest that, if for the neo-avant-garde the task of literature is to know, through its forms, the reality and the world we live in, then its role as 'formalised' language seems to be closer to what McHale defines as a "cognitive" one, and as a consequence, to a Modernist aesthetics. Moreover, as I have tried to show so far, the relevance the neo-avant-garde grants to the notion of the 'autonomy' of art and their deliberate and conscious refusal to carry out a 'repetition' of the self-criticism of the sub-system art seem closer to a Modernist aesthetics. And yet, their closeness to a Modernist aesthetics is counterbalanced by the collective aestheticization of the notion of 'crisis' and by the ensuing "political action" (I am here using Angelo Guglielmi's words) they carry out, or better rhetorically articulate, in response to such a crisis. According to the neo-avant-garde, the world and reality we live in are caught up in an unredeemable crisis and, more than being simply '*contemplated*', such a crisis demands to be actually *acted upon*: the task of the artist is to acknowledge it by formally acting upon it, that is, by 'reflecting' it onto the structures of the work of art he or she produces; the task of literature is to provide the textual subject (the reader) with a cognitive evaluation or, one could say, an almost tangible experience lived through on an aesthetic level, of the crisis as it is experienced in the first place by the artist as forming subject.

²⁴³ B. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 10.

IV. The Sense of an Epochal Crisis

I think that it is exactly the neo-avant-garde's rhetorical construction of the notion of 'crisis' that the critic should pay particular attention to as its 'apocalyptic' connotations are a variant of the apocalyptic vision of history that, as we have seen in the Futurist manifesto, gives impetus to the historical avant-garde. It is particularly the notion of *sperimentalismo* (experimentalism) as articulated by the neo-avant-garde that seems to draw heavily from an apocalyptic rhetorical reconstruction of history and reality.

Angelo Guglielmi radically differentiates the 'experimental' practice of the neo-avant-garde from its historical counterpart: accordingly, once previous 'experimental', (i.e. modernist) artists such as "Proust, Joyce, Musil and Picasso have unblocked the way by getting rid of any unwanted resistance", ²⁴⁴ and once their innovations have been subsumed into the norm, the degree of formal freedom enjoyed by the contemporary writer determines the redundancy of avant-garde art itself. Nevertheless, Guglielmi rhetorically constructs such a cultural situation by making use of war-like metaphors that are widely used, for instance, in Futurist Manifestoes:

The situation of contemporary culture is similar to a city abandoned by the enemy after having been disseminated with mines. The winner is at the threshold of the city: what will he do? Will he send the shock troops and conquer a city that has already been conquered? If he did that he would worsen the chaos by provoking new unnecessary ruins and casualties. He should call for the specialized detachments from behind the front line that would enter the abandoned city not with machine guns but with Geiger detectors. ²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ "Proust, Joyce, Musil, Picasso hanno spianato tutte le strade, facendo giustizia di ogni fastidiosa resistenza", A. Guglielmi, 'Avanguardia e sperimentalismo', in *Gruppo 63: Critica e teoria*, p. 329. My translation.

²⁴⁵ "La situazione della cultura contemporanea è simile a quella di una città dalla quale il nemico, dopo averla cosparsa di mine, è fuggito. Il vincitore che è alle porte della città cosa farà? Invierà delle truppe d'assalto a conquistare una città già conquistata? Se lo facesse aggraverebbe il caos, provocando nuove inutili rovine e

While restating the avant-gardist rhetorical conflation between politics and art – “[...] in the present situation [...] every anarchic attitude [...] would] arrest our cultural evolution. Today terrorism is a reactionary movement – and we have the proof of that in politics”²⁴⁶ – Guglielmi makes an oxymoronic use of that rhetoric: despite denying the possibility of a repetition of the avant-garde, he metaphorically formulates ‘sperimentalismo’ by negatively drawing from the manifesto’s discursive rhetoric. Accordingly, “experimentalism” is a ‘post-retaliatory’ practice the main aim of which is the ‘responsible’ pursuit of the cultural evolution within the literary canon. ‘Experimentalism,’ thus, is the only possible way to re-establish – exactly in the tentative, experimental way suggested by the term – the lost relationship between reality and language. For Guglielmi, far from being merely individualistic, experimentalism is actually a morally charged practice, a collective “super-individual aim. It belongs to the category of the moral”.²⁴⁷ Experimentalism responds to Rimbaud’s imperative to be modern: it is the *only* viable alternative for the contemporary writer to respond in a responsible way to the definitive crisis of language as an institution determined by the “objective inexistence and incapacity of History”, the *only* possible answer to the contemporary end of History and end of ideologies. “The task of the new avant-garde is to disentangle the ‘real’ from any kind of connivance with the old world and to ‘suspend it in a neutral space’ where things lay ‘real and motionless and unaware’”.²⁴⁸ “Its aim is to recuperate the real in its intactness by taking it away from History, uncovering its most

morte. Piuttosto, farà arrivare dalle retrovie i reparti specializzati che avanzeranno nella città abbandonata non con le mitragliatrici ma con gli apparecchi Geiger”, *ibid.*, p. 330. My translation.

²⁴⁶ “[...] nell’attuale situazione [...] ogni atteggiamento anarchico [...] è una] battuta di arresto dell’evoluzione culturale. Oggi il terrorismo, e ne abbiamo in politica la dimostrazione più lampante, è un movimento reazionario”, *ibid.* My translation.

²⁴⁷ “un obiettivo superindividuale. Appartiene alla categoria dei doveri morali”, *ibid.*, p. 334. My translation.

²⁴⁸ “Il compito della nuova avanguardia è quello di sganciare il reale da ogni connivenza con il vecchio mondo e di ‘sospenderlo’ in uno spazio neutro dove le cose giacciono ‘reali e immobili nemmeno in attesa’”, *ibid.*, p. 379. My translation.

neutral sense/meaning [accezione], its most impartial version, its degree zero".²⁴⁹ By 'degree zero' Guglielmi means the neutralization of the ideological values and connotations impeding the perceiver's neutral knowledge and recognition of the 'real' as a pure phenomenological fact.

Besides making use of the discourse of martial siege, Guglielmi's articulation of 'experimentalism' presents apocalyptic connotations: by decreeing the end of, and by throwing into the past, the conniving relationship between language and ideology, it is rhetorically constructed as the only stylistic and formal position the contemporary artist can choose on moral grounds. Indeed, the experimentalist distrust and 'iconoclasm' towards language as an institution entails, as Sergio Quinzio has pointed out, "a total distrust towards all explanations, principles, interpretations, categories and evaluations elaborated by history and by man, and a rebellion against them in order to seek something that has not been captured and corrupted yet by inadequate and partial schemes and structures [...]".²⁵⁰ According to Quinzio, one can distinguish – within Guglielmi's own articulation of experimentalism as an attitude and a practice – a *destruens* "apocalyptic" moment – the proclamation of the end (degree zero) of history, the end of ideology, the end of the distorting relationship between language and reality – and a *construens* "triumphalist" moment – the celebration of modern art and experimentalism as a true emancipation from ideology, of the *open work*'s ability to represent an ever changing world and the scientific progress at the core of it, of experimentalism's ability to set language free from its social and historical determinants. It is probably Quinzio's philosophical training as a theologian that

²⁴⁹ "Suo scopo è quello di recuperare il reale nella sua intattezza: ciò che può fare sottraendolo alla Storia, scoprendolo nella sua versione più imparziale, al grado zero", *ibid.*, p. 378. My translation.

²⁵⁰ "una sfiducia totale per tutte le spiegazioni, i principi, le interpretazioni, le categorie, le valutazioni elaborate dalla storia e dall'uomo, e una ribellione contro di esse per cercare qualcosa che non sia stato già captato e corrotto dagli schemi e dalle strutture angusti e parziali [...]", S. Quinzio, 'Limiti e contraddizioni dell'avanguardia', in *Avanguardia e neo-avanguardia*, p. 196. My translation.

allows him – as early as in 1966 – to detect the “apocalyptic connotations” of the neo-avant-garde’s experimentalism, “[...] a sort of extreme life belt a world of shipwreck survivors is obliged to make use of because, unfortunately, the last lifeboat has been wrecked together with the ship”.²⁵¹ Those apocalyptic connotations and war-like metaphors are disseminated more or less evidently, and also, more or less ironically, through the texts of the neo-avant-garde: indeed, one needs only to think of the title – suggested by Edoardo Sanguineti – the experimental poets gave to their collection of poetry: *I novissimi*. In Catholic eschatology (as father Arnall’s sermon teaches us in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), the ‘novissimi’ (the newest) are the four last things, death, judgement, hell and heaven, while at the time of the emperor Caesar, the ‘novissimi’ were the rear guard of the Roman army. The war-like metaphor is taken up also by Giorgio Manganelli in *Letteratura come menzogna* (1967). For Manganelli, the “verbal object” (“*oggetto verbale*”) the writer produces is an “explosive device” (“*esplosivo*”), the result of the writer’s *knowing ignorance*, a sort of liberating naïvety foregrounding unpredictable results: he or she “completely ignores the sense of language in which he or she is involved, hence his or her power, his or her capacity to live it as a magma”,²⁵² i. e., as the *degree zero* of language:

The object that is born from the complicity between his science and his ignorance is totally impervious to him. He knows that it is a device fabricated according to the rules [...] according to which devices are fabricated, but he ignores whose hands will throw this inexhaustible explosive device, in what and how many bombings; he only has the clandestine and hateful hope that, in time, it will end up offending *everybody*.²⁵³

²⁵¹ “una specie di estrema tavola di salvezza per un mondo di naufraghi, della quale bisogna servirsi solo perché, disgraziatamente, è colata a picco non solo la nave ma persino l’ultima scialuppa”, *ibid.*, p. 192. My translation.

²⁵² “Ignora totalmente il senso del linguaggio in cui è coinvolto, donde la sua potenza, la sua capacità di viverlo come magma”, G. Manganelli, ‘Letteratura come menzogna’ (1967), *La letteratura come menzogna*, p. 220. My translation.

²⁵³ “L’oggetto che nasce dalla complicità della sua scienza e della sua ignoranza gli è totalmente impervio. Sa che è un ordigno, fabbricato secondo le regole [...] con cui si fabbricano gli ordigni: ma egli ignora affatto in

The work “is totally ambiguous, it can go all directions, it is inexhaustible and senseless”.²⁵⁴ Once created, the verbal object is autonomous even from its author. Its fruition is independent of the creator’s intentions: its immanent ambiguity and freedom from constraints external to its own linguistic necessity and inner mechanisms makes it inexhaustible. The text as an autonomous linguistic construct is free from previous interpretations of the real: it is a magic circle, a limbo where things appear and can be imagined only according to the internal logic enacted by formal necessity. It is a self-contained reality, a world governed by unprecedented and endogenous dynamics. It enacts a process where meaning autonomously self-generates: “the literary work is an artifice, an artifact of uncertain and ironically fatal destination. The artifice bears in itself, *ad infinitum*, other artifices; a proposition devised using metal, hiding a buzzing metaphor; by dissecting it we set free hard exact words, arrangements of lucid phonemes”.²⁵⁵ In Manganelli’s *Letteratura come menzogna*, war or guerrilla-like metaphors coalesce with the phantasy of the artist tirelessly working in the laboratory, or workshop, in absolute seclusion – “his devotion is fanatic and inadequate” –²⁵⁶ like a scientist at the threshold of the unknown. The metaphor of the scientist is a recurring one: in Umberto Eco’s ‘Il Gruppo 63, lo sperimentalismo e l’avanguardia’ (1962), the experimental writer is depicted – again, more or less ironically – as working in the “alchemic cavern”²⁵⁷ (“*antro alchemico*”) in all secrecy away from the eyes of the non-initiated. For Angelo Guglielmi also the experimentalist is half magician and half scientist, an alchemist:

quali e quanti attentati, da quali mani, verrà lanciato questo esplosivo inesauribile; e lo assiste la clandestina, odiosa speranza che, col tempo, esso finirà con l’offendere *tutti*”, *ibid.* My translation.

²⁵⁴ “Totalmente ambiguo, percorribile in tutte le direzioni, è inesauribile e insensato”, *ibid.*, p. 221. My translation.

²⁵⁵ “L’opera letteraria è un artificio, un artefatto di incerta e ironicamente fatale destinazione. L’artificio racchiude, ad infinitum, altri artifici; una proposizione metallicamente ingegnata nasconde una ronzante metafora; dissecandola, metteremo in libertà dure parole esatte, incastri di lucidi fonemi”, *ibid.*, p. 222. My translation.

²⁵⁶ “La sua devozione è fanatica e inadeguata”, *ibid.*, p. 221. My translation.

²⁵⁷ U. Eco, ‘Il Gruppo 63, lo sperimentalismo e l’avanguardia’ (1962), *Sugli specchi e altri saggi*, p. 95.

“the new ‘experimentalists’ do not know iconoclasm. *Ils sont des magiciens* [they practise] magic”.²⁵⁸ Arthur Rimbaud’s *alchimie du verbe* is here taken as the metaphor the artist’s imperative to modernize systematically the literary/poetic word – in Eco’s terms, to produce formal novelty by acting out his or her revolt *on* and *in* language.

For the neo-avant-garde, the aesthetic work is a self-purposive and self-sustaining verbal object (Manganelli); its origin is irreducibly oppositional and thus singular: the artist’s revolt is ‘interiorized’ on the aesthetic level (Sanguineti); it is a semantic revolt the market cannot commodify (Curi); its meaning does not rely upon external reality: it stems instead from formal freedom and internal necessity, from the artist’s subjectivity that is transposed and objectified in it – or to use Eco’s words – “becomes form” (“*si fa forma*”). The self is interiorized in the work: the latter becomes the opportunity for continual acts of regeneration and infinite, unforeseeable uses; it is the strange product of the artist’s *knowing misuses* of language – in short, an original creation. The same rhetoric of uniqueness and originality is at work in Alfredo Giuliani’s notion of “riduzione dell’io”, “the reduction of the I” meant as linguistic objectification and semanticization (*semanticizzazione*) of the creating self all the Novissimi poets carry out: “A poem is vital when it forces us beyond its own inevitable limits, that is, when the things that have inspired its words induce in us the sense of other things and other words, prompting our intervention; one ought to profit from a poem as one would from some rather extraordinary encounter”.²⁵⁹

The Italian neo-avant-garde make systematic and extensive use of the rhetoric of originality that, according to Rosalind Krauss, is constant in both avant-garde and modernist

²⁵⁸ “I nuovi sperimentali non conoscono l’iconoclastia. *Ils sont des magiciens* [praticano] la magia”, A. Guglielmi, ‘Avanguardia e sperimentalismo’, in *Gruppo 63: Critica e teoria*, p. 333. My translation.

²⁵⁹ A. Giuliani, *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 25. “Una poesia è vitale quando ci spinge oltre i propri inevitabili limiti, quando cioè le cose che hanno ispirato le sue parole ci inducono il senso di altre cose e di altre parole, provocando il nostro intervento; si deve poter profittare di una poesia come di un incontro un po’ fuori dell’ordinario”, A. Giuliani, *I novissimi*, p. xix.

discourse. Indeed, according to Krauss, the very notion of the avant-garde is a function of the discourse of originality:

One thing only seems to hold fairly constant in the vanguardist discourse and that is the theme of originality. By originality, here, I mean more than just the kind of revolt against tradition that echoes Ezra Pound's "Make it new!" or sounds in the futurists' promise to destroy the museums that cover Italy [...] More than a rejection or dissolution of the past, avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth. Marinetti, thrown from his automobile one evening in 1909 into a factory ditch filled with water, emerges as if from amniotic fluid to be born – without ancestors – a futurist. This parable of absolute self-creation that begins the first *Futurist Manifesto* functions as a model for what is meant by originality among the early twentieth century avant-garde. For originality becomes an organicist metaphor referring not so much to formal invention as to sources of life.²⁶⁰

Accordingly, "The self as origin is safe from contamination by tradition because it possesses a kind of originary naiveté":²⁶¹ hence Manganelli's child-like *knowing ignorance*: "[...] the writer 'does not know' but his is a highly specific way of not knowing",²⁶² and Angelo Guglielmi's belief in the writer's ability – via the magic formula of *experimentalism* – to transcend history and ideology, to demystify the real and bring it "al grado zero", to "the degree zero" of a new, absolute beginning. The claim to originality is a discursive feature that is common to both modernism and avant-garde art. If, as suggested by Krauss, the very notion of the avant-garde can be seen as a function of the discourse of originality, then it becomes rather difficult not to acknowledge the modernism and avant-gardism of the Italian neo-avant-garde.

Certain traits of the neo-avant-garde's articulation of the aesthetic event seem to be very close to the modernist ideal of the 'autonomous' work – autonomous in two senses:

²⁶⁰ R. E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, p. 157.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

²⁶² "[...] lo scrittore 'non sa': ma il suo è un modo altamente specifico di non sapere", G. Manganelli, 'Letteratura come menzogna' (1967), *La letteratura come menzogna*, p. 220. My translation.

with regard to tradition and with regard to economic necessity. Within the terms of the founding phantasy according to which modernism comes to define itself, the innovative self-purposive work of art is constituted by the singularity of its origin and differs in essence from the commodity: the latter is by definition excluded from the domain of art.²⁶³

IV. The Modernism of the Italian Neo-avant-garde.

The neo-avant-garde enjoyed relative ‘spectacularity’ and public visibility, especially with the foundation of the Gruppo 63 and the vast scale enactment of the historic avant-gardes’ apparatus of national and international congresses, quarrels, scandals, polemics, group photographs, mysterious episodes, private jokes and provocations. So much so that Umberto Eco wrote “I could not participate in any of the meetings Gruppo 63 held in Palermo. So I missed those inflamed public meetings where – as the *elzeviri* [i. e. the articles in the cultural section of the newspapers] wrote, borrowing first hand news from a show business article – terrible things happened”.²⁶⁴ The ‘spectacularity’ of the neo-avant-garde, the frontally oppositional stance they occupied within the field of cultural production together with their corpus of theoretical writing, did affect the arena of public speech – i.e. literary reviews, magazines etc. – as it fractured it, just as the manifesto does, by creating an ‘historically’ oppositional “we” and a corresponding “they”. These effects were entirely played out within

²⁶³ A ‘malicious’ interpretation of the idea of *the death of the author*, i. e. the neo-avant-garde’s internalization of the writer’s protest, would suggest that the ‘cutting off’ of the link between text and author becomes especially useful when the latter is threateningly close to the realm of the show business and popular culture, i. e. the realm of the *commodity*.

²⁶⁴ “Non ho potuto partecipare alle riunioni palermitane del Gruppo 63 per l’intera durata dei lavori. Ho perciò mancato a quelle accese riunioni pubbliche in cui – come dissero gli *elzeviri*, mutuando notizie di prima mano da un articolo di varietà – accaddero cose terribili”, U. Eco, ‘La generazione di Nettuno’, in *Gruppo 63. La nuova letteratura*, p. 407. My translation.

the ‘field of cultural production’ where aesthetic positions are charged with generational, political and moral meanings. The “we” or “our” Italo Calvino uses to criticize the neo-avant-garde in ‘Il mare dell’oggettività’ (1959) – “[...] *we* [...] oppose unconditional surrender to objectivity. But *our* opposition is [...] an opening to man’s active intervention”²⁶⁵ (both italics are mine) – goes beyond the simple use of the majestic plural and actually speaks for a whole generation, in the same way as Gianni Scalia’s use of “we” does in *Avanguardia e neo-avanguardia* (1966) – where he denounces the neo-avant-garde’s fetish-like treatment (*feticizzazione*) of language: “we, unashamed realists and anti-nominalists, are interested more in the thing than in the name” (my italics).²⁶⁶

With the flourishing of literary reviews and the further expansion of an elite culture industry – or in Gian Carlo Ferretti’s epitomizing words, of *Il mercato delle lettere* –²⁶⁷ and also with media representation and mass visibility, the adventure of the neo-avant-garde dangerously approaches the realm of popular culture: art is spectacularized, becoming just another commodity produced by the *society of the spectacle*. But more generally, it is the whole of theoretical discourse that seems to be expended in the market place (notwithstanding its ideological connotations). Frederic Jameson has pointed out that “Theory [...] theoretical discourse – has seemed unique, if not privileged, among the postmodern arts and genres in its occasional capacity to defy the gravity of the zeitgeist and to produce schools, movements, and even avant-gardes where they are no longer supposed to exist”.²⁶⁸

Jameson’s periodization of the post-modern has been taken up, among others, by Alfonso Berardinelli. According to Berardinelli, the Italian neo-avant-garde is but a product

²⁶⁵ “[...] *noi* [...] facciamo opposizione alla resa incondizionata all’oggettività. Ma la *nostra* opposizione è [...] una ripresa dell’intervento attivo dell’uomo” (corsivo mio), I. Calvino, ‘Il mare dell’oggettività’, *Una pietra sopra*, p. 41. My translation.

²⁶⁶ “a *noi*, non vergognosi realisti e antinomonalisti, interessa più la cosa che il nome” (corsivo mio), G. Scalia, ‘La nuova avanguardia (o della ‘miseria’ della poesia)’, in *Avanguardia e neo-avanguardia*, p. 23.

²⁶⁷ Cf. G. C. Ferretti, *Il mercato delle lettere*, *passim*.

²⁶⁸ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural logic of Late Capitalism*, p. xvi.

of 'post-modern' re-organization of culture as an institution not only because of their active role within such re-organization – as members of staff at both *il Verri* and Feltrinelli, as university researchers and lecturers at a time when university education became available on a mass scale, and also as journalists and members of 'lower' information services – but also because of academia's immediate and seamless absorption of their transgressions from the literary norm. In Berardinelli's words: "It seems to me that, when the modern transgression is taught at university, something has happened ... It must mean that the scandalous and transgressive modernity is over and we are in a postmodern situation".²⁶⁹ Berardinelli is here providing an attempt at 'periodization.' What the label 'postmodern' implies is that the institutionalization of the Italian neo-avant-garde's "transgressions", that is, the early *accademizzazione* of the poetry of the *novissimi*, is the unmistakable symptom of Modernity's loss of its capacity to shock, that is, of the beginning of 'postmodernism' in Italy. Another implication may be that, since the neo-avant-garde is but an expression of the rationalization of cultural production and the ensuing thorough commodification of culture generally, their cultural and literary practice provides no ground for a coherent and justified criticism of bourgeois rationality – as this is reflected in the institutions of culture. The point Berardinelli is making is that the neo-avant-garde's embeddedness in these deprives them of any ability to be truly oppositional. But, as we have seen, in the historical avant-garde 'protest' and 'consumerism' also, far from excluding each other, were two tightly interwoven and co-dependent phenomena. There is a silent assumption underlying the argument concerning the postmodernity of the neo-avant-garde. Such an assumption is based on the concept of the *inauthenticity of repetition*: what is re-used, what comes around for the

²⁶⁹ "Quando le trasgressioni moderne vengono insegnate all'università, mi pare che qualcosa sia avvenuto ... Vorrà dire che la modernità scandalosa e trasgressiva è finita e siamo in una situazione postmoderna", M. Ganeri, 'Il paradosso critico. Intervista a Alfonso Berardinelli', p. 128

second time – it may be a style, a technique or a genre – is *inauthentic*, and thus *postmodern*: a *pastiche*. ‘Pastiche’ may here be envisaged as a notion subsidiary to that of the ‘postmodern’: it denotes the playfully de-contextualized reprisal and ‘re-use’ of past literary genres and techniques. Such a ‘reprisal’ seems to have the power to transcend, if not mock, the sensibility of the time.²⁷⁰ The workings of the subtle rhetoric of delegitimization of what is ‘repeated’, re-used, and thus un-original, can be appreciated also within Berardinelli’s reconstruction of neo-avant-garde postmodernity and of their repetition of the techniques of the historical avant-garde – namely, the neo-avant-garde’s, and especially the *novissimi*’s, use of the montage technique:²⁷¹

The Italian neo-avant-garde believed that they could re-use the techniques of the historical avant-garde and apply them in the laboratory. But such a detached application with a consentient public ready there waiting, with the university lecturers already happy and all set to write their analyses, with the school books ready to anthologise all the Novissimi clique, well, all that was nothing but postmodern.²⁷²

The inauthenticity of repetition – as opposed to modernist originality – is the silent assumption on which the argument of the postmodernity of the neo-avant-garde is based. For Berardinelli, thus, the neo-avant-garde’s dispassionate, unemotional and detached repetition

²⁷⁰ By ‘pastiche-like’ re-use of the genre I mean, for instance, what the Beatnik poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti did, in a bitterly ironical way, with his ‘Populist Manifesto For Poets, with Love’ (written far later than in the ‘60s though, as late as in 1975), where the exhortation to take action, to end an era (“the coming end of industrial civilization”) in order that a new era may finally be initiated for Man should improbably be achieved by means of the ironical invitation to poets to “come out of your closets”. Here, though, more than the bombastic Futurist manifesto, the critic should think of the rather subtly ironical use made of the genre by Tristan Tzara: “Poets, come out of your closets, / [...] / The hour of *oming* is over, / the time of keening come, / a time for keening & rejoicing / over the coming end / of industrial civilization / which is bad for earth & Man.” L. Ferlinghetti, *Poesie*, pp. 18-20.

²⁷¹ I discuss the novissimi’s use of montage in chapter five.

²⁷² “[...] la neoavanguardia italiana ha creduto di poter riprendere le tecniche delle avanguardie storiche e applicarle in laboratorio. Ma questa applicazione a freddo, in laboratorio, con un pubblico già pronto e consenziente, con i docenti universitari già pronti e felici di scrivere le loro analisi, con le antologie scolastiche pronte ad accogliere tutto il gruppetto dei Novissimi, ecco, tutto questo non era che postmoderno”, M. Ganeri, ‘Il paradosso critico. Intervista a Alfonso Berardinelli’, p. 128.

of the techniques of the historical avant-garde is but a confirmation of the total “neutralization” of their textual practice.

The notion of repetition is central to a theoretical understanding of the neo-avant-garde as an overall phenomenon. Hal Foster – probably one of the main theoreticians on the subject – ²⁷³ takes a stance that is the opposite of Berardinelli’s. In his ‘What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?’ (1994) Foster goes to great lengths in order to salvage the credibility of the neo-avant-garde movements of the ‘60s and he does so by elaborating a ‘psychoanalytical’ interpretation of the resurgence, or ‘return’ or ‘repetition’ of the historical avant-garde via the movements of the ‘60s. Foster’s interpretation tries to establish a dialogue between problems of form and problems of subjectivity by means of its underlying analogy between the ‘trauma’ the historical avant-garde inflicted upon the art institutionality on the one hand and, on the other, the trauma as it may be experienced and elaborated by the subject as meant by Freud via Lacan: “For Freud, especially as read through Lacan, subjectivity is not set once and for all; it is structured as a relay of anticipations and reconstructions of traumatic events.”²⁷⁴ If “It always takes two traumas to make a trauma”, ²⁷⁵ that is, if “one event is only registered through another that recodes it”, ²⁷⁶ then the postwar movements are not passive repetitions of the prewar movements: to the contrary, “the neo-avant-garde *act[s]* on the historical avant-garde in ways that we can only now appreciate”. ²⁷⁷ Foster is here referring to and elaborating Žižek’s observations on Lacan, “The crucial point here,” says Žižek, “is the changed status of an event: when it erupts for the first time it is experienced as a contingent trauma, as an intrusion of a certain non-symbolized Real; only through repetition

²⁷³ Cf. also B. H. D. Buchloh, *Neo-avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, *passim*.

²⁷⁴ H. Foster, ‘What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?’, in *October*, pp. 29-30.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

is this event recognized in its symbolic necessity – it finds its place in the symbolic network”.

²⁷⁸ Only through the neo-avant-garde movements of the ‘60s – argues Foster – can we now understand the necessity of the historical avant-garde because only through its very ‘return’ can the self-criticism of the Art as an institution be finally realized in the symbolic order. More specifically, what characterize the ‘return’ of the avant-gardist work is the ‘re-use’ of devices such as the collage, the assemblage and the ready-made, the grid and monochrome painting.

The problem with arguments assessing the authenticity (Foster) – or the inauthenticity (Berardinelli) – of the neo-avant-garde by evaluating it according to the problem of ‘repetition’, is that such arguments take at face value the avant-garde’s claim to originality. The latter is a self-founding myth purported on a theoretical level and performed only rhetorically by the manifesto, while the actual artistic practice of the avant-garde is underwritten by a subtext of repetition and resurgence right from its inception. In Krauss’ words: “if the very notion of the avant-garde can be seen as a function of the discourse of originality, the actual practice of vanguard art tends to reveal that ‘originality’ is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence”. ²⁷⁹ Krauss points out one figure that epitomizes avant-garde art’s essential tension to repetition in the visual arts: the grid; “the grid-scored surface is the image of an absolute beginning. Perhaps it is because of this sense of a beginning, a fresh start, a ground zero, that artist after artist has taken up the grid as the medium within which to work, always taking it up as though he were just discovering it”. ²⁸⁰ Modernist and avant-gardist artists alike have used the grid against its grain and original purpose, i.e. as a systematic instrument for the dissection and upheaval of

²⁷⁸ H. Foster, ‘What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?’, in *October*, p. 30. Foster is here quoting from S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 61.

²⁷⁹ R. E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, pp. 157-8.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

proportion and renaissance perspective (Pablo Picasso and the the Cubists) and also for the reduction of the material continuum into primary colours (Piet Mondrian). Once the material continuum is geometrically divided into minimum units and fragments by the structure of the grid, the separate units and segments can be *materially* moved around, displaced, readjusted in new perspectives and disturbing redispositions and adjacencies. The initial geometrical abstractness of the grid is the methodology behind the reckless attack upon the material continuum carried out by the montage technique as used by Kurt Shwitters and also John Heartfield. Appearances are dissembled and viewed from different angles while pre-existing forms are scoured away, demolished by a new dynamic centrifugal force. Perspective is replaced by entropy. The grid's promise of inexhaustible resourcefulness – novelty – relies upon the endless potential of the almost infinite arrangements of pre-existing fragments. Destruction becomes the pre-requisite of creation, as Pablo Picasso suggests in a famous interview: "A picture used to be a sum of additions. In my case a picture is a sum of destructions".²⁸¹ The fragmenting workings of the grid first appear in Pablo Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907). The use of the grid is brought to yet another level of novelty and all-inclusiveness by Picasso's *Still life with Chair Caning* (1912). The remarkable feature of *Still Life* is that it "transcends previous cubist innovations [...with] a piece of oil-cloth stuck onto a canvas";²⁸² because of its juxtaposition of heterogeneous fragments coming from different material continua. *Still Life* is the first example of the collage, or montage, technique. As a methodology and tool of fragmentation, the grid was used by both Cubists and Futurists who *adopted* the techniques of Cubism. The technique of the montage, or

²⁸¹ Quoted from M. Gill, *Image of the Body*, p. 371. Gill is quoting from A. H. Barr, *Picasso*.

²⁸² D. Scheunemann, 'On Photography and Painting. Prolegomena to a New Theory of the Avant-Garde', in D. Scheunemann (ed.), *European Avant-Garde: New Perspective*, p. 22.

collage, was then taken up by John Heartfield, Kurt Schwitters, Hannah Höch, Raoul Hausmann, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp and others.

The grid as a methodology and *modus operandi*, as the abstract geometrical paradigm of the physical fragmentation of a pre-existing material continuum (a material that could be both visual and verbal) actually condemns the avant-garde artist not to originality, but to repetition – says Krauss – within a modernist avant-gardist discourse, the terms ‘originality’ and ‘repetition’ “seem bound together in a kind of aesthetic economy interdependent and mutually sustaining, although the one – originality – is the valorized term and the other – repetition – or copy or duplicated – is discredited”.²⁸³

Despite the avant-garde’s constitutive anxiety about originality, the montage is the one technique on which almost all avant-garde art is based. It could be described as an systematic – and thus repeatable *ad infinitum* – decontextualization and defunctionalization of the ‘material’ making up the work: after having been torn out of the context giving it meaning, fragmented material is treated as an empty sign to which only the avant-gardiste can impart meaning through new arrangements and dispositions. As pointed out by Bürger, “The work is no longer created as an organic whole but put together from fragments”²⁸⁴ (hence Picasso’s definition of a work as a “sum of destructions”):

For the avant-gardistes [...] material is just that, material. Their activity initially consists in nothing other than [...] tearing it out of its functional context that gives it meaning. Whereas the classicist recognizes and respects in the material the carrier of a meaning, the avant-gardistes see only the empty sign, to which only they can impart significance. The classicist correspondingly treats the material as a whole, whereas the avant-gardiste tears it out of the life totality, isolates it, and turns it into a fragment.²⁸⁵

²⁸³ R. E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, p. 160.

²⁸⁴ P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, p. 70.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

As used in the textual practice of the novissimi, the montage (or linguistic collage) brings, in Alfredo Giuliani's words, "asyntactism" ("asintattismo") and "schizomorphic" poetry, i.e. the systematic upheaval of syntax. As used by the novissimi poets, the montage becomes the ultimate form of criticism of, and taking distance from, 'lower' forms of every-day information, the 'meaningless' devalued products of the mass media, forms of popular culture on which only the poetic operation can impart real significance (chapter five offers a more in-depth discussion of the novissimi's use of montage). For the time being, though, I would like to make some concluding remarks on the neo-avant-garde's articulation of experimentalism as an original and innovative artistic practice.

V. Conclusion

We started out our enquiry from the Futurist manifesto and moved on to the neo-avant-garde's unanimous condemnation of both Futurism and the historical avant-garde. That condemnation seems to be confirmed further by their refusal to posit themselves in a direct dialogical position with the manifesto – the genre through which the historical avant-garde thematically addresses and criticizes the autonomy of Art. It has also been suggested that the absence of a collective manifesto in the neo-avant-garde posits some problems for the critic who may want to carry out a direct comparison with the historical avant-garde. Nevertheless, texts do not simply have uses which are mapped out in advance by the genre: they are themselves *uses of genre*, performances of or allusions to the norms and conventions which form them and which they may, in turn, transform.²⁸⁶ The neo-avant-garde's apocalyptic vision of history, their use of war-like metaphors and, last but not least, their use of the self-legitimizing myth of originality are rhetorical regularities stemming from the genre of the

²⁸⁶ Cf. J. Frow, *Genre*, p. 25.

manifesto; they are uses of the genre. If texts are performances of genre, the Italian neo-avant-garde's corpus of writing seems to act on the historical avant-garde's manifestoes mainly positively because of their consistent discursive re-enactment of the myth of originality.

'Repetition' is the hidden subtext recurring in modernist artistic practice although on a rhetorical level (the theoretical, discursive, self-defining practice as exemplified by the genre of the manifesto) modernist aesthetics is based on the positive evaluation of originality and the devaluation of what is repeated – repetition, iteration, seriality. Within a modernist aesthetics (or self-defining rhetoric), only commodities come to be produced through seriality and repetition: accordingly, "The serially produced commodity differs in essence from the self-purposive work of art, which is constituted by the singularity of its origin, and the commodity is by definition excluded from the domain of art".²⁸⁷ Umberto Eco explains this situation as follows: "The modern criterion for recognizing artistic value was *novelty*, high information. The pleasurable repetition of an already known pattern was considered, by modern theories of art, typical of Crafts – not of Art – and of industry".²⁸⁸ However, this straightforward dichotomization changes dramatically within the terms of a post-modernist aesthetics. The latter corresponds to a historical period "for which iteration and repetition seem to dominate the whole world of artistic creativity, and in which it is difficult to distinguish between the repetition of the media and the repetition of the so-called major arts".

²⁸⁹ According to Eco, the change of the status of 'repetition' as a term and notion signals the epochal shift from a modernist aesthetics to a postmodernist one where it finally becomes a viable and workable formal principle and acquires positive connotations: by blurring the

²⁸⁷ J. Frow, *Cultural Value and Cultural Studies*, p. 24.

²⁸⁸ U. Eco, 'Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics', p. 161.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

distinction between originality and repetition, 'high' art and 'low' art, postmodernism develops an "aesthetics of seriality".

Within the Italian neo-avant-garde's literary discourse, 'repetition' is still endowed with negative connotations. The rhetorical delegitimization of 'repetition' is particularly evident in Guglielmi's condemnation of 'avant-gardism' meant as unoriginal repetition of what now belongs to a contaminated past – as opposed to experimentalism's capacity for innovation. In the next chapter, I pursue the argument for the modernism of the Italian neo-avant-garde as an overall project through an analysis of the notion of the 'open work'.

Chapter Four: The Originality of the ‘Open Work’

I. Avant-garde Art, Formalism and the *Homo Academicus*.

In a relatively recent monograph on the novissimi poets, John Picchione explains the methodological choice of leaving unquestioned the relationship between the neo-avant-garde and its historical counterpart by arguing that, after the demise of the Futurist movement, “The revolt of the historical avant-garde [...] had not been marked by any significant developments”²⁹⁰ in Italy: “[b]y the End of the Second World War, and through the late 1940’s and 1950’s, the avant-garde’s legacy, particularly within the literary context, had essentially been lost”.²⁹¹ Picchione’s statement is problematic though. The visual forms initiated by Futurism in poetry developed without loss of continuity at least up to the ‘70s.²⁹² In 1943, Carlo Belloli – the precursor of concrete poetry in Italy – wrote TESTI-POEMI MURALI (WALL TEXT-POEMS) and PAROLE PER LA GUERRA (WORDS FOR WAR). Both Belloli’s works were published the following year, by Erre (Milan) and by Edizioni di Futuristi in Armi (Milan) respectively. Marinetti wrote an introduction to TESTI-POEMI MURALI in which he hailed Belloli as “the youngest futurist dedicated to the development of new forms, lively, striking, yet essential and stemming from positions already reached in aeropoetry and futurist art”.²⁹³ Belloli saw his poetry as moving towards a closer identification with the changing needs and tastes of modern culture and art. In a move that anticipated the style of ‘50s concrete poetry, Belloli called his introduction to TESTI-POEMI MURALI “visual poetry”. Here are some excerpts:

to see will become more necessary than to listen.

²⁹⁰ J. Picchione, *The New Avant-Garde in Italy. Theoretical Debate and Poetic Practices*, p. 6.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

²⁹² See A. Spatola, *Verso la poesia totale*, p. 22.

²⁹³ I am here quoting from M. E. Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, p. 38.

the people of the future will not seek poetry in libraries but on the walls of their rooms, and they will find in it an integrating factor uniting them with the environment in which they work.

the key-words of typographical constructions aim at the greatest possible economy of expression ²⁹⁴

As we will see in the following chapter, Belloli's visual poetry will be pursued and elaborated further by the Adriano Spatola, Lamberto Pignotti and the other concrete poets of the Gruppo 63 and Gruppo 70. Moreover, the neo-avant-garde retrace the steps of Futurism when, in their attempt to make the practice of new expressive values and artistic ideologies hegemonic, they create a corpus of theoretical writing that both overshadows the production of literary texts proper and advertises the historical necessity of such novelty by confrontationally defending it against other factions of the literary field. Technically speaking, one may argue that the neo-avant-garde did not write a manifesto, and yet their corpus of theoretical writing carries out the same aggressively advertising function as the manifesto did for the historical avant-garde. The codifications of the genre may have changed, but its uses and effects are stable enough to make its workings still recognizable.

The ideological differences between the '*poetica*' of Futurism and that of the neo-avant-garde are indeed substantial and are the consequence of a profoundly dissimilar attitude towards mass communication. Italian Futurists based their protest upon the celebratory appropriation of the language of the mass communication thus leading to what Roman Jakobson defines – in a way that is reminiscent of Anceschi – “une réforme dans le domaine

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37. These statements anticipate the manifestos of concrete poets like the Noigandres group and Eugen Gomringer.

du reportage, non dans celui du langage poétique. [...]”.²⁹⁵ Some decades later, the poets of the neo-avant-garde envisage critically such language as a commodity *tout court* produced by the mass media system. In Curi’s words, “far from exercising, or actually having the possibility to exercise a dissenting function, or even only a demystifying function within society, their [of the *mass media*] products, are rigidly conditioned by the structures”²⁹⁶: hence their commodity status. For the *novissimo* poet, the task of poetry is to criticise everyday commodified language by reversing the syntactic conditions allowing for its false communicativeness and by reconstructing, within the poetic space, the semantically alienating conditions allowing for a truly revealing verbal message, a breakthrough in experience laying bare the falsity of the reader’s frozen patterns of perception, both rational and sensory, in everyday life. In Alfredo Giuliani’s formulation of “vitalistic poetry”, “Poetry is an encounter with the extraordinary.” Or again, “Poetry is what it does”. The hortatory intentions of the Futurist manifesto come back disguised within the defence of the value of poetry *per se*. In the reader’s mind, aesthetic fruition becomes a moment of re-elaboration of the social, or so the *poeta novissimo* would like us to believe. The syntactic workings of language are *made strange*, so much so that the poetic message itself becomes obscure, almost undecipherable. The deliberate sabotage of the syntactic rules of normal communication slows down the comprehension process: the meaning of the poetic message is delayed reading after reading, its deciphering involving an unnerving amount of intellectual labour. From this point of view, the *poesia novissima* is to be considered as instance of *open*

²⁹⁵ R. Jakobson, ‘Fragments de ‘La nouvelle poésie russe’’, *Huit questions de poétique*, p. 14.

²⁹⁶ “i *mass media*, in quanto i loro prodotti lungi dall’esercitare e dall’avere attualmente la possibilità di esercitare una funzione contestatrice o anche soltanto demistificatrice all’interno della società, sono rigidamente condizionati dalle strutture”, F. Curi, ‘Sulla giovane poesia’, *Ordine e disordine*, p. 90. My translation.

work: “[t]he more complicated comprehension gets, the more the original message [...], instead of appearing worn out, is actually renewed, ready for more thorough ‘readings’”.²⁹⁷

Umberto Eco gives an historical account of the stage reached by contemporary literature, of which *poesia novissima* is but an instance, by suggesting that “the conditions and nature of aesthetic pleasure have progressively changed: the latter used to be an emotional and intuitive pleasure but has now become an *intellectual pleasure*” (author’s italics).²⁹⁸ And yet this is not Hegel’s premonition of the death of art come true: to the contrary, the contemporary reader finds himself or herself in the same semiotic situation as the medieval reader did: for the latter, “pleasure resided in the exercise of an intelligence that discovered real referents [...] under the veil of strange verses”²⁹⁹ It is not a coincidence that Eco’s defence of a highly intellectualistic approach is here based on a reference to pre-capitalist time: the *longue durée* of the all-absorbing, time-consuming comprehension process is time spent outside the normal mechanisms of everyday commodified communication. The spatial and physical *elsewhere* of the proto-avant-garde – Rimbaud’s obsessive and aimless travelling, Gauguin’s Tahiti women as a symbol of the pristine and the untouched, the African tribal masks used by Picasso for the preparation of the ‘*Demoiselles d’Avignon*’ – becomes a mental space and capacity unique to the well-trained mind of the intellectual. The development of such a *topos* may even be hypothesized as yet another mark of distinction at

²⁹⁷ “[e] quanto più la comprensione si complica, tanto più il messaggio originario [...] anziché consumato appare rinnovato, pronto a più approfondite “letture”, U. Eco, *Opera aperta*, p. 86. My translation.

²⁹⁸ “[...] il piacere estetico è andato via via mutando la propria natura e le proprie condizioni, ed è diventato, da piacere di carattere emotivo ed intuitivo che era un tempo, *piacere di carattere intellettuale*.” U. Eco, ‘Due ipotesi sulla morte dell’arte’, *La definizione dell’arte*, p. 265. My translation.

²⁹⁹ “il lettore medievale non faceva consistere il suo piacere in un esercizio dell’intelligenza che scopriva sotto il velame dei versi strani i referenti reali di un discorso per figure?”, *ibid.* My translation.

a time where the abundance of new technology and media information makes the exotic ordinary and long-distance travel available.³⁰⁰

Within Futurism, semiotic velocity, the simultaneous and immediate impact of the message upon the perceiver's mind, is of paramount value. *Poesia novissima* is an instance of the neo-avant-garde's reversal of that technology-boosted value. Literary criticism – and the present study makes no exception – pays tribute to these ideological differences and stylistic idiosyncrasies and keeps to the rules generating them in order to avoid embarrassingly sweeping, a-historical generalizations as well as to justify its own necessity *qua* exegetic practice. And yet, on a deeper structural level, both Futurism and the neo-avant-garde are examples of the dialectic of cultural distinction inherent in the field of cultural production. The mechanisms of cultural distinction are such that, in the succession of various artistic ideologies, the rebuke and negation of more or less immediately preceding hegemonic schools and styles seem to be the sincerest form of flattery. The previous chapter gives evidence that Futurism is as much relevant (although, of course, in a negative sense) as that of neo-realism, *ermetismo* and *crepuscolarismo*. The ideological differences articulated by the neo-avant-garde in order to distinguish themselves from Futurism can be accounted for as the discursive crystallization of what Pierre Bourdieu defines as “the law of the search for distinction” which “explains the apparent paradox which has it that the fiercest and most fundamental conflicts oppose each group to its immediate neighbours, for it is these who most directly threaten its identity, hence its *distinction*, and even its specifically cultural

³⁰⁰ As explained in *Apocalittici e integrati*, this medieval-like, mediated, and intellectual (thus not Romantic, immediate, emotional) process of understanding art implies a lot of intellectual labour and it is not based upon the emotional identification of the perceiver (the subject) with the artefact (the object); U. Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*, pp. 347-8.

existence.”³⁰¹ Put otherwise, an uncritical engagement in the debate on ‘repetition’ is the ultimate tribute the critic more or less unknowingly pays to the rules of the field of cultural production: “*returns* to past styles [...] are never ‘the same thing’, since they are separated from what they return to by negative reference to something which was itself the negation of it (or the negation of the negation, etc)”.³⁰²

According to Andreas Huyssen, “[w]ithin the project of modernity [the avant-garde] launched a successful assault on 19th century aestheticism, which insisted on the absolute autonomy of art, and traditional realism, which remained locked into the dogma of mimetic representation and referentiality”.³⁰³ The Italian neo-avant-garde does not criticize the notion of the autonomy of art: it attempts instead a re-elaboration of it. As suggested by Umberto Eco, “[r]ather than *knowing* the world, Art *produces* complements to the world, autonomous forms enriching the existing ones by exhibiting their own laws and individual life”.³⁰⁴ And yet, the trait the neo-avant-garde unconditionally share with all avant-garde art is “the elevation to a dogma of an initially legitimate critique of traditional artistic forms rooted in mimesis”.³⁰⁵ A point made by Francesco Calvo could help us to frame the avant-gardist anti-mimetic stance: Calvo says that “when the ancients affirmed that art imitates nature, they meant that the artistic process goes through stages that assimilate it to a natural process.”³⁰⁶ The notion of mimesis thus, originally drew its meaning not from a reference to the real object out there but from the kind of experience we have when we perceive a natural object.

³⁰¹ P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 293.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁰³ A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, p. 173.

³⁰⁴ “L’arte, più che *conoscere* il mondo, *produce* dei complementi del mondo, delle forme autonome che s’aggiungono a quelle esistenti esibendo leggi proprie e vita personale”, U. Eco, *Opera aperta*, p. 50. My translation.

³⁰⁵ A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, p. 173.

³⁰⁶ “Quando gli antichi affermavano che l’arte imita la natura, intendevano dire che il procedimento dell’arte attraversa degli stadi che la assimilano a un processo naturale.” F. Calvo, *L’esperienza della poesia*, p. 50. My translation.

Avant-garde art triggers a comprehension process “against nature” by making the object look strange again, by pillorying the formal representation of it that has become ‘second nature’ and illusory expressive authenticity, and by exalting instead the *technè*, the newness of the formal devices and techniques involved in producing the artistic object. In other words, avant-garde art programmatically applies Russian formalism’s tenet of the subordination of the poem’s content to its formal devices. This can be put into perspective by going back to the constitutive relationship between formalistic and structuralist theories on the one hand and, on the other, avant-garde literary experimentation. As pointed out by Remo Ceserani, Jakobson’s strong sympathy for the poetic experimentation of Russian Futurism set a paradigm for the Berlin-based avant-garde, Prague school structuralism, French neo-formalism and neo-structuralism of the ‘60s and, finally, the Italian neo-avant-garde. “One can easily maintain that both [formalistic theories and the avant-gardes] have been one of the strongest expressions characterizing modernity and that one has been the theoretical, ideological front of the other”.³⁰⁷ Far from being a coincidence, the resonance Roland Barthes’ ideas have had with the neo-avant-garde – Umberto Eco’s early studies in semiology, his theorization of the ‘open work’ – is but a confirmation of – or in Ceserani’s words, “the most mature episode” restating – the organic relationship between these two phenomena. One may add that the early ‘academization’ of the neo-avant-garde also, far from being a sign of the post-modern as suggested by Berardinelli, is actually the confirmation of the exclusive relationship between institutionalised intellectual circles and this very specific kind of art. The reasons for such a happy union are not that mysterious: in order to come to

³⁰⁷ “Si può tranquillamente sostenere che entrambi i fenomeni sono stati un’espressione fra le più caratteristiche e forti della modernità e che l’uno è stato il versante teorico, ideologico, dell’altro. E forse, con la prospettiva di oggi, si può anche sostenere che la stagione recente dello strutturalismo, della semiotica e della neoavanguardia sono stati l’ultimo, e il più maturo, episodio, della grande avventura della modernità, forse oggi irrimediabilmente finita”, R. Ceserani, *Guida allo studio della letteratura*, p. xv. My translation.

grips with the intellectual challenge posited by avant-garde art, that is, in order to understand the meaning of the formal motivation of a given experimentation, the 'average reader' is forced to seek the specialist help offered by a supposedly 'ideal reader', thus corroborating the necessity of the exegetic work, and the actual social existence, of the *homo academicus*.

Indeed, despite the variety of stylistic differentiations, anti-mimetism is the steady characteristic all avant-garde art has in common. And yet, analysis of such a stance would remain rather abstract if not related to the strategic, reputation-building uses it undergoes within the contingent configuration of the field. The Italian neo-avant-garde put themselves in an imaginary *en avant* position with regard to both literature and science, that is, they make their mark by strenuously advocating the necessity for a renewal of literary criticism as an academic specialization in constant need of upgrading its cognitive tools. They do this by first assimilating a whole variety of new disciplines, such as semiology, structuralism and phenomenology. One may even argue that the assimilation of these new disciplines plays the same role as a 'distinction mark' as the appropriation of the language of the means of mass communication does for Italian Futurism. The rationalistic and positive-knowledge based stance put forward by the neo-avant-garde and the celebration of 'madness' put forward by Futurism seems to be poles apart: "[c]ommon sense, reasonableness, logic are bourgeois standards; madness is their opposite and [Marinetti's] *Uccidiamo il chiaro di luna* [Kill the Moonlight] is an hymn to madness, the natural ally of the machines, destroying the old world".³⁰⁸ And yet, in a way, to keep on focusing on the relationship between the neo-avant-garde's institutionality and the non-institutionality of its historical counterpart by stressing the 'madness' and 'inapplicability' of Futurist protest could be rather misleading. Despite

³⁰⁸ "Il buon senso, la ragionevolezza, la logica sono i parametri della borghesia; la follia, è il loro opposto e *Uccidiamo il chiaro di luna* è un inno alla follia, naturale alleata delle macchine nella distruzione del vecchio mondo", M. Calvesi, *Avanguardia di Massa*, p. 257. My translation.

their ideological and formal idiosyncrasies, all the movements of the historical avant-garde can be roughly divided into two main strains depending on the ‘applicability’ of their formal protest. Maurizio Calvesi dubs those two strains as “*disorder* [...] avant-gardes, i.e. deviant, transgressive or rebellious avant-gardes as opposed to *order* [...] ‘rational’ avant-gardes [...]: avant-gardes that are (apparently) ‘inapplicable’ on the one hand and, on the other, rational ones that are ‘applicable’ and ‘applied’”.³⁰⁹ Marcel Breuer’s now iconic first tubular steel chair – the Cesca chair – can be seen as a symbol of the applicability on an industrial scale of Bauhaus’ design – one presenting virtually no hiatus between the creation of the new and its integration into the productive system.³¹⁰

A cursory analysis of the theoretical corpus of writing produced by the neo-avant-garde suggests that the anti-mimetic stance they articulate is to be related to an unmitigated enthusiasm for scientific (not narrowly technological) innovation and especially for the opportunities such an innovation can open up for both literature and academic discourse. Umberto Eco’s *Opera aperta* seems a rather clear instance of such a situation:

[...] it is always risky to maintain that the metaphor or the poetic symbol, sound reality [music] or the plastic form, are knowledge-instruments that let us know the real more profoundly than those provided by logic. Knowledge of the world flows through the authorized channel of science and the artist’s aspiration to be a clairvoyant, although poetically productive, is always ambiguous. [...] Nevertheless, any artistic form can very well be envisaged as an *epistemological metaphor*, if not a substitute, for scientific knowledge. This means that, in every century, the way in which art forms are structured

³⁰⁹ “avanguardie [...] del *disordine*, ovvero della devianza e trasgressione o ribellione, in contrapposto a quelle dell’*ordine* [...] o della ‘razionalità’ [...]: avanguardie (apparentemente) ‘inapplicabili’ a confronto delle avanguardie ‘applicabili’ e applicate”, *ibid.*, p. 64. My translation.

³¹⁰ Breuer was the protégé of the Bauhaus founder Gropius and his tubular chairs perfectly fulfilled Gropius’ idea of Bauhaus according to which every object should be functional, aesthetically pleasant, inexpensive, and also well-suited as a prototype for industrial production.

reflects – like a similitude [...] the way in which science, or anyway the culture of the time, sees reality.³¹¹

Accordingly, “[t]he closed and unambiguous work of the medieval artist reflected a conception of the cosmos that was a hierarchy of clarified and established orders [...] whereas] the poetics of the ‘open’ work [...] of the work which, fruition after fruition, never remains like itself [bears] the vague or precise effects of some tendencies in contemporary science”.³¹² The capacity of the ‘open work’ to catch up with contemporary culture – that is, with the way science is mediated through culture in the individual consciousness of the artist – resides in its refusal to produce a unitary and unambiguous vision of the world and create instead an epistemological experience of it that is as indeterminate and manifold as the one elaborated by science after Einstein’s theory of relativity³¹³: “[a]s in the Einsteinian universe, in the *open work* [opera in movimento], the denial of the existence of a privileged experience does not imply chaos, it implies instead the rule that allows for the organization of the [field] of relationships.”³¹⁴ Or again, according to Renato Barilli, “for its epistemological, and psychological, and anthropological outcomes [literature] is as positive as all those methods that make science advance by allowing it to overcome certain *impasses* [...]”³¹⁵ As Barilli

³¹¹ “È infatti sempre più arrischiato sostenere che la metafora o il simbolo poetico, la realtà sonora o la forma plastica, costituiscano strumenti di conoscenza del reale più profondi degli strumenti apprestati dalla logica. La conoscenza del mondo ha nella scienza il suo canale autorizzato, ed ogni aspirazione dell’artista alla veggenza, anche se poeticamente ha sempre in se qualcosa di equivoco [...] Tuttavia ogni forma artistica può benissimo essere vista, se non come sostituto della conoscenza scientifica, come *metafora epistemologica*: vale a dire che, in ogni secolo, il modo in cui le forme dell’arte si strutturano riflette – a guisa di similitudine [...] il modo in cui la scienza o comunque la cultura dell’epoca vedono la realtà”, U. Eco, *Opera aperta*, p. 50. My translation.

³¹² “L’opera conclusa e univoca dell’artista medievale rifletteva una concezione del cosmo come gerarchia di ordini chiariti e prefissati [...] mentre] la poetica dell’opera ‘aperta’ [...] dell’opera che ad ogni fruizione non risulta mai uguale a se stessa [porta in se] le risonanze vaghe o precise di alcune tendenze della scienza contemporanea”, U. Eco, *Opera aperta*, pp. 50-1. My translation.

³¹³ See Eco’s *Le poetiche di Joyce*, especially the chapter on the ‘cosmos’ in *Finnegans Wake* for an example of the influence of Einstein’s relativity theory on Eco’s understanding of Joyce’s modernism.

³¹⁴ “Come nell’universo einsteiniano, nell’opera in movimento il negare che vi sia una sola esperienza privilegiata non implica il caos delle relazioni, ma la regola che permette l’organizzarsi delle relazioni”, U. Eco, *Opera aperta*, p. 58. My translation.

³¹⁵ [...] nei suoi esiti epistemologici. Psicologici, antropologici essa [la letteratura] gode della positività che è propria di tutti i metodi che portano avanti le scienze consentendo loro di superare certe *impasses* [...]”, R. Barilli, *La barriera del naturalismo*, p. 22. My translation.

writes in his *La barriera del naturalismo*, writers “register” social changes: the cognitive value of literature is equivalent to the cognitive value of other scientific and philosophical disciplines. The scientific slant of the neo-avant-garde’s *sperimentalismo* is thus symptomatic of the supposed “*dialectic between the experimentation of science and the experimentation of art*, when by ‘experimental’ one means the condition of a kind of art that tries to anticipate new cultural situations.”³¹⁶

If one pushes such a position to its extreme consequences, one would say that literature is already a more or less mediated application of scientific knowledge and that is the premise and reason for the obsolescence of neo-realism and realism as modes of representation on the one hand and, on the other, the neo-avant-garde’s unconditional celebration of modernist aesthetics: “The new tools for research [...] the stream of consciousness, interior monologue, dilatation and fracture of time [...] originate from the most valid and experimentally verified scientific investigation.”³¹⁷ The value of literature resides in its being an epistemological metaphor of reality, that is, in its capacity to supplement our understanding of reality, and yet this capacity is not achieved by means of the artist’s subjective, prophetic intuitiveness; on the contrary, it is achieved through the dialectic relationship between literature on the one hand and, on the other, philosophy, science and critical thought. Given that the relationship between science and literature is so close, a Romantic, intuitive and subjective understanding of the latter becomes clearly obsolete: literary criticism as an academic specialization drawing from a variety of specialist knowledge plays a vital role in bringing out the cognitive value of literature. For this reason,

³¹⁶ “*dialettica tra la sperimentalità delle scienze e la sperimentalità dell’arte*, intendendo in tal senso ‘sperimentale’ come condizione di un’arte che tenta di anticipare nuove situazioni culturali”, U. Eco, ‘Sperimentalismo e avanguardia’, *La definizione dell’arte*, p. 256. My translation.

³¹⁷ “I nuovi strumenti di ricerca [...] lo *stream of consciousness*, il monologo interiore, la dilatazione e la frattura del tempo hanno [...] più di una radice confluyente nella più valida e sperimentalmente verificata indagine scientifica”, R. Barilli, *La barriera del naturalismo*, p. 136. My translation.

its task is to elaborate and specify the impact of such a relationship upon literature: "It is commonplace by now to talk about the various connections between Proust and Bergson, a strain of French thought critical of science, W. James, *Gestaltpsychologie*, or [about the connections of] the whole of the literary avant-garde with Freud and psychoanalysis, Einstein and relativity. Although these connections are strong, evident and undisputed, one should clearly specify them by author, case by case".³¹⁸

The straightforward, 'scientific' slant of Barilli's programme makes of *La barriera del naturalismo* the neo-avant-garde's manifesto against realism. And yet, as is the case for many others manifestoes, once it is actually applied, its supposedly systematic programme actually delivers much less than promised, as the study itself seems a rather traditional instance of literary criticism. Despite being approximate even according to its own terms, the text does produce precise, manifesto-like rhetorical effects upon the configuration of the field: its all and sundry condemnation of realism also entails the obsolescence of the kind of intellectual knowledge ideologically supporting it, that is, Marxism. Since the proclaimed obsolescence of the latter is determined by the assimilation of more up-to-date specialist tools, it is difficult not to envisage the whole enterprise of the neo-avant-garde as the corporatization of the man of letters reclaiming a specific role and function for his activity. On the one hand, the rationalist, specialist, knowledge-based nature of their claim makes of the neo-avant-garde as an overall phenomenon an instance of 'orderly' and 'integrated', avant-garde. And yet, on the other, the model of science is not that of 'paradigm' science but precisely of the paradigm-breaking forms of quantum mechanics and the general theory of

³¹⁸ "È ormai un luogo comune parlare dei vari agganci reperibili in Proust con Bergson e con tutta la *couche* francese di critica della scienza, con W. James, con la *Gestaltpsychologie*, o in genere di tutta l'avanguardia letteraria con Freud e la psicoanalisi, con Einstein e la relatività: rapporti che bisognerebbe precisare con chiarezza di volta in volta nei confronti dei singoli [...]", R. Barilli, *La barriera del naturalismo*, p. 138. My translation.

relativity (and later of chaos and complexity theories): science as a form of avant-garde thought rather than a model of order.³¹⁹ Umberto Eco envisages a deep correspondence between formal processes underlying the construction of the artistic object and those of theoretical discourse as “analogies founded on common cognitive modules, epistemological premises at the base of both [art’s] poetics and scientific methodologies”.³²⁰

The neo-avant-garde’s contradictory relationship with Marxism, one of both negation and appropriation, is exemplified by Renato Barilli’s *La barriera del naturalismo* – a ‘manifesto’ against Lukacs’ influence in Italy. Here, the stylistic and narrative values the Lukacs of *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* condemns as an uncritical mirroring of modernity’s decline – ‘*action gratuite*’, stream of consciousness, the dropping of the selection principle – are envisaged by Barilli not only as fundamentally positive but also as a viable technique the contemporary artist can still use. Reduced to the core, Barilli’s manifesto is a strenuous defence of the modernist traits – exactly as described by Lukacs – of writers such as Pirandello and Svevo. And such a defence is advocated on the grounds of the progress of both science and philosophy. The loss of the principle of selection is a consequence of the contemporary subject’s scientific, ‘entropic’ vision of the world. The contemporary subject is forced to make sense of an amazingly abundant amount of information. This abundance is determined by the expansion of mass communication. Only through formal organization can such chaos be mastered. Artistry as *techné* is the ‘positive pole’ giving meaning to the entropic disorder the contemporary subject is thrown into. In a way, this explains the ‘apocalyptic’ tones highlighted in the previous chapter: the artist, or the

³¹⁹ My thanks to John Frow for this insight.

³²⁰ “analogie fondate sui moduli conoscitivi, i presupposti epistemologici che sottendono tanto le poetiche quanto le metodologie scientifiche”. I am here quoting T. de Lauretis, *Umberto Eco*, p. 51. My translation.

man of letters, is entrusted with the task of giving meaning, through form, to the chaos of contemporary life.

Both Umberto Eco and Renato Barilli were very close to a philosophical *milieu* in their formative years and their envisaging of literature in the light of a relatively easy relationship between science and philosophy can be seen as a consequence of their closeness to such intellectual *milieux*. In 1953 philosophers such as Abbagnano and the neo-rationalist Geymonat were at the centre of the foundation of the philosophical movement ‘neoilluminismo’: the aim of this philosophical movement was “to clarify the manifold ‘techniques of reason.’ – to use Abbagnano’s words – and to use them in order to purify them from the ‘romantic’, or simply rhetorical, misunderstanding of Italian philosophical provincialism”.³²¹ The members of the ‘neoilluminismo’ were mainly university professors from northern Italy interested in the newly perceived relevance of the relationship between science and philosophy. The movement itself can be seen as the first attempt, after the hegemony of Croce’s idealism, to investigate the relationship between scientific knowledge and philosophy as humanistic knowledge collectively, as a society of philosophers meeting up to discuss and debate in an extremely informal way.

Science is no longer the object of the Futurists’ clumsy celebration. The title of the neo-avant-garde’s review *Il verri* was itself a homage to both the Italian enlightenment and to *neoilluminismo*’s interest in ‘technological’ innovation in science and philosophy. More than that, it was an act of collective participation in the secular myth of Italian neo-enlightenment as a genealogical ‘origin’ allowing for ideological rejection of both Marxism and Catholicism at one stroke. In a later essay on Gruppo 63, Eco eagerly re-states such an origin while

³²¹ “chiarire le molteplici ‘tecniche della ragione’, secondo la felice espressione di Abbagnano, e di usarle per ripulire dai molti gravami ‘romantici’ o semplicemente retorici il nostro provinciale giardino filosofico”. M. Pasini and D. Rolando (eds.), *Il neoilluminismo italiano. Cronache di filosofia (1953-1962)*, p. xi.

rejecting, once again, any relationship with the historical avant-garde.³²² So experimentalism participates in the spirit of enlightenment in that the artist's protest is rationally carried out on the level of formal *technique*. And yet, such eagerness to do away with the historical avant-garde because of its 'madness' and 'external' protest, does not take into account the 'utilitarian' rationalism and applied knowledge distinguishing the 'orderly' strain of the historical avant-garde.

As much as the choice of that 'origin' may be collective, the writers and poets of the neo-avant-garde do not seem to participate in Barilli and Eco's enthusiasm for the hermeneutic possibilities opened up by the merging of philosophy and science. The 'group' refuses to present itself as a monolithic object of study and personal differences flare up: rather than a celebration of science, the apocalyptic post-atomic scenario of Sanguineti's *Laborintus* seems to be a visionary accusation of the misuses of technological advancement.

³²³ The poetic language of Alfredo Giuliani's novel *Il giovane Max* with its glossary of pseudo scientific neologisms, is an overt parody of the pedantic classificatory function of scientific language.³²⁴ Such a slant can be found even in Nanni Balestrini, the most 'technological' of the Novissimi poets. The verbal fragments of Balestrini's poem *Il sasso appeso* are all numbered (A1, A2, ..., A4 ...; B1, B2, B3, B4; C1, ...C3, C4, C5 etc..). On a closer look, though, the algebric precision of the series of fragments is undermined by the fact that some numbers, i.e. fragments, are actually missing (as A3, A5, B5 and so on). Both the existing and missing fragments ideally build up a graphic, or a grid – with the missing fragments being signalled by blank spaces: the geometric precision of the whole

³²² Cf. U. Eco, 'Il Gruppo 63, lo sperimentalismo e l'avanguardia', *Sugli specchi e altri saggi*, *passim*.

³²³ As pointed out by Elisabetta Baccarani, *Laborintus* lacks any kind of enthusiasm for science: "In *Laborintus*, che per certi versi potremmo vedere come una sorta di poema cosmologico aggiornato all'era atomica, di entusiasmi o intenti celebrativi non v'è alcuna traccia", E. Baccarani, *La poesia nel labirinto. Razionalismo e istanza "antiletteraria" nell'opera e nella cultura di Edoardo Sanguineti*, p. 116.

³²⁴ Cf. N. Lorenzini, *Il laboratorio della poesia*, pp. 120-121.

project is flawed and sabotaged by the unknown and the unclassified: the blank space. The malfunctioning grid ‘organizing’ the verbal fragments of Balestrini’s *Il sasso appeso* – both known catalogued fragments and unknown ones – can be seen as a parody of the idea of a quantifiable/quantifying power of scientific knowledge – which is here symbolized by the grid as a structure. Rosalind Krauss has strongly stressed the symbolic power of the grid in modernist aesthetics – a power stemming from the coalescence of form and science: “For the [modernist] artist who wished to enlarge his understanding of vision in the direction of science, the grid was there as a matrix of knowledge”.³²⁵ The grid-like organization of the verbal fragments of *Il sasso appeso* mimics the workings of scientific knowledge while delegitimising them. The poet provides the reader with the directions for the ‘geometrical’ organization of the fragments into a grid, and yet, once directions are followed scrupulously, not only are some boxes left empty, but the fragments actually corresponding to the remaining boxes of the grid are interchangeable. Instead of ‘scientifically’ clarifying the meaning of the poem, the grid-like arrangement of the fragments leads to a further ludic suspension of the meaning by bringing more chaos and interpretive frustration. From this point of view, Balestrini’s poems refuse to be read as an instance of the open work: the imponderability of the actual meaning of the fragments, the entropic chaos that can be neither mastered nor ordered, often makes a mockery of the ‘interpreting’ labour of the ideal reader of poetry.

The turmoil created by the Italian neo-avant-garde in the contemporary schools and universities was readily registered by Eugenio Montale in *Satura*. I believe it is extremely likely that, when Montale ironically wrote: “Con orrore / la poesia rifiuta / le glosse degli scoliasti. / Ma non è certo che la troppo muta / basti a se stessa / o al trovarobe che in lei è inciampato /

³²⁵ R. E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*, p. 15.

senza sapere di esserne / l'autore",³²⁶ he was parodying the neo-avant-garde's notion of the 'open work' and its revolutionizing impact on poetry as a genre.³²⁷ In 1963 Umberto Eco triumphantly states: "[...] in modern art, problems of poetics have prevailed on those of the work as a concrete accomplishment."³²⁸ He decides to verify this together with Balestrini. The poet and the semiologist plan to write a thorough and precise description of seven lost, or never written, poems. Eco tells us that the description would include the structure of the verse, punctuation, an explanation of the space left blank and the kind of words used. On top of this, there would be a critical essay explaining the meaning of the poems and also pointing out that "their structure was so important that, once the structure itself was described, there would be no need to write these poems at all".³²⁹ What Eco is describing here is an example of conceptual art like the one formulated five years later by the American conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner in 'Declaration of Intent' (1968). Weiner contended that an individual work never needed to be actually realized since "each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership".³³⁰ Accordingly, "1. The artist may construct the work. 2. The work may be fabricated. 3. The work need not be built".³³¹ In a way similar to Weiner's 'Declaration of intent', the collaboration between the semiologist and the poet prefigured a work stripped of the imponderability of the creative process. This 'dematerialization' would have reduced the

³²⁶ With horror/ poetry refuses/ the glosses of the scholiasts./ But it is uncertain that the mute be enough for itself / or for the second-hand dealer who stumbled on her / without knowing to be / her author", E. Montale, 'La poesia', *Satura I, Tutte le poesie*, p. 333. My translation.

³²⁷ For an insight on the relationship between Montale and the neo-avant-garde see J. Butcher, *Poetry and Intertextuality. Eugenio Montale's Later Verse*, pp. 105-6. For Montale's textual relationship with Umberto Eco see pp. 200-2.

³²⁸ "[...] per l'arte moderna il problema della poetica ha prevalso sul problema dell'opera in quanto cosa fatta e concreta [...]", U. Eco, 'Due ipotesi sulla morte dell'arte', *La definizione dell'arte*, p. 265. My translation.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

³³⁰ This statement has been used in many presentations since its first publication in *ARTnews* in the fall of 1968. See L. Weiner: *Posters November 1965–April 1986*, p. 173.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

work to its technical interpretation based on overcoming the material and concrete moment of creation. And yet, this collaboration never took place as Balestrini kept on writing only actual poems and no theory whatsoever, leaving the ‘task of theory’ to Eco. As opposed to Weiner’s conceptual art, *poesia novissima* as an overall project still proclaims the supremacy of the creative moment over the theoretical one. The same tension between ‘creation’ and ‘theory’ seems to be felt also by the *novissimo* poet Alfredo Giuliani. In a recent interview Giuliani says: “Me, for instance, I used to read these stories with curiosity ... theories of literature, from the French structuralists spreading in that period in Italy ... but in the end, once you looked into them, they didn’t say anything at all”. Question: “Whom would you save from those readings?”. Giuliani’s answer: “No ... excuse me, I don’t give a damn about saving anything, I’ve never thought of that ... I am only interested in the use of poetic language”.³³² Giuliani’s statement becomes even more poignant when compared to the conscious deployment of theory, both in a formalistic and in a semiotic sense, he makes in his second introduction to *I novissimi*. Giuliani’s taking distance from theory seems a final defence of the *mestiere di poeta*, the poet’s ‘craftsmanship’. It also seems to be a delayed reply to Eco’s derisive remark on the redundancy of poetic activity or indeed, of any creative or fictional production at all: “Maybe because I am not an artist I am hardly interested in the emergence of a great poet with a thunder-like voice and windswept hair.”³³³

A ‘malicious’ interpretation of those idiosyncrasies would suggest a corporate implosion of the neo-avant-garde’s competitiveness. Despite their formal innovation and their participation, to a certain extent, in the theoretical debate, the whole group of the *novissimi*

³³² “Io che per esempio leggevo incuriosito di queste storie teorie della letteratura, dagli strutturalisti francesi che impazzavano in quel periodo in Italia, però poi, alla fine, andavi a stringere non c’era nulla. Domanda: “chi salveresti invece tu di allora di quelle letture?” Risposta: “No che me ne frega di salvare qualcosa scusa, non c’ho mai pensato, a me mi interessa l’uso poetico del linguaggio ...” Alfredo Giuliani ‘Il giovane Max’, resource online.

³³³ U. Eco, in *Gruppo 63: La nuova letteratura*, p. 416.

poets still understood theory in a traditional way, as a moment *assisting* the creative process, not *replacing* it.

II. Umberto Eco: A Comparison with Leslie Fiedler's Postmodernism.

Within the overall discursive space of the literary field, many of the texts of the neo-avant-garde rhetorically create a speaking position that is invariably articulated in terms of an irreducibly antagonistic logic claiming an innovative, critical and liberating role on at least three levels: on the level of the *high* end of the aesthetic domain, where they claim to exercise a literary practice free from the constraints of the old and yet still dominant aesthetic modes of the realist novel and crepuscular poetry; on the level of mass culture, where they adopt a critical stance against various forms of 'easy communication' and commodified language epitomized by the phenomena of best-sellerism and fuelled by the unprecedented expansion of the media; and finally, on a third level which is strictly theoretical and is closely related to the previous ones, where they engage in an oppositional dialogue with the writers of the 'traditional' left – constituting the then dominant model for intellectual practice – on both the status of art and the role of the intellectual within capitalist society. It is in the light of the intersections of these three levels that one can appreciate the ambiguities the literary critic needs to face when attempting to map out the theoretical frame within which an understanding of the phenomenon of the Italian neo-avant-garde has to be gauged. On the one hand, the oppositional rhetorical construction of their emancipatory stance against both ends of the aesthetic spectrum, that is the *old* – the outmoded realist and crepuscular aesthetics – and the *low* – the best-sellers – seems to retrace the typically modernist equation between the old and the low, an equation that stresses the absolute novelty of artistic practice by pushing forms of formerly high art into the sphere of low art. And yet, on the other hand, the peculiar

configuration of the Italian literary field in the '50s and the '60s – dominated as it was by the Gramscian left and its ideology of the organic intellectual – forces them to take at face value and elaborate a theoretical strategy on the problems of the status of the commodification of Art and the role the intellectual is called to play within it: this theoretical conundrum is far more akin, at least potentially, to the social project of the historical avant-garde than to modernist literary practice. The inconsistencies and ambiguities of the neo-avant-garde's relationship with 'mass culture' stem exactly from its aprioristic oppositional stance on all the above mentioned levels: on the one hand, they reject the all and sundry condemnation of 'mass culture' of the traditional left, and yet on the other, their literary production never manages to overcome the limitation, that is the *literariness*, of a modernist practice traditionally meant. Despite their attempt to elaborate a more or less critical account of the media, the neo-avant-garde never challenges the notion of *literariness*. For Fausto Curi, and the group of the *poeti novissimi*, the function of the latter and of literature generally is to demystify the ideology conveyed by the mass media system. Also Umberto Eco seems to agree with such position. His notion of *sperimentalismo* – meant as a specifically “internal” formal protest that is entirely contained within and conveyed by the formal organization of the artefact – can be envisaged as a consistent attempt at keeping literature proper separated from the sensational, and thus un-literary and ‘social’ (but in a derogatory way) threats of the *society of the spectacle*. This is the ground on which the ‘spectacularity’ of the “*external* provocation (I underline the word external) [...] with regard to the public [...]”³³⁴ of the historical avant-garde is condemned in favour of an *experimental*, “internal” protest. According to Eco, the ineffectiveness now reached by “external, sociological protest”³³⁵ can

³³⁴ “[...] provocazione *esterna* (sottolineo esterna) [...] nei riguardi del pubblico”, U. Eco, in *Gruppo 63: il romanzo sperimentale*, p. 75. My translation.

³³⁵ “provocazione esterna sociologica”, *ibid.* My translation.

be counterbalanced only by “the internal-structural-provocation, which the Russian formalists called *ostranenie* on which the aesthetic effect is actually based”:³³⁶ The socially critical function of literature can only stem from its aesthetic effect.³³⁷ “Every fruition is thus an *interpretation* and an *execution*, because in every fruition the work revives an original perspective.”³³⁸ The multidimensionality of the open work is brought to life by the subject’s interpretation: meaning is activated by the constant interplay between formal openness and the unrepeatable singularity of subjective experience.

With the mediation of semiology and information science as academic disciplines, popular culture, that is, the entertainment offered by television programs, the cinema and comic strips, is finally validated as an area worth of serious study. Within a semiotic framework, the concept ‘people’ as both ideological myth and national entity is brought to coincide with the ‘public’ of the culture industry. The task of the intellectual *qua* ‘operatore di cultura’ [culture operator] and technician for the mass communication system becomes the task of teaching the people (the public) critically to decode the cultural goods produced by the media and to discover in those very mass produced products their own needs for social justice and progress.³³⁹ Umberto Eco’s study on *Charley Brown* cartoons is an instance of such an approach that represents a radical rejection of the notion of culture industry advocated by the Frankfurt School. Pier Paolo Pasolini’s notion of “omologazione” [homologation] that is, the standardization of consciousness through consumerism and the ensuing disappearance of both local and individual differences, bears the ideological imprint

³³⁶ “la provocazione-interna-strutturale, quella che i formalisti russi chiamavano effetto di straniamento e su cui si basa proprio l’effetto estetico”, *ibid.*, p. 78.

³³⁷ On the other hand, in *Opera aperta* Eco says that “l’estetica deve interessarsi più ai modi di dire che a ciò che vien detto”, *Opera aperta*, p. 111.

³³⁸ “Ogni fruizione è così una *interpretazione* ed una *esecuzione*, poichè in ogni fruizione l’opera rivive in una prospettiva originale”, *ibid.*, p. 34.

³³⁹ Cf. V. Boarini and P. Bonfiglioli (eds.), *Avanguardia e restaurazione. La cultura del novecento: testi e interpretazioni*, 1976, p. 514.

of Adorno's and Horkheimer's notion of culture as an industry obeying the rules of capitalist production, leading to a reification and homogenization of art, and turning recipients into consumers of mass produced commodities.

Eco dubs this stance as 'apocalyptic', hence the title *Apocalittici e integrati*. The book was published in 1964 – three years after the publication of *I novissimi*, two after *Opera aperta*, and one after the foundation of *Gruppo 63* – as a reaction to the widespread hostility on the part of Italian and more generally European intellectuals towards what was seen as an American-led invasion of 'mass-culture' and a consequent standardisation of cultural forms at the expense of rich and variegated national ones.³⁴⁰ Here, the idea of the culture industry is rejected on the fundamental grounds that cultural entities are not commodities through and through as argued by Adorno and other 'apocalyptic' intellectuals: if cultural goods had only an exchange value and no use value they would miss their function of ideological reproduction. And this is true for both art and popular culture. Eco makes this point as follows: the manufacturing of books has now become an industrial endeavour following the rules of production and consumption; hence a series of negative phenomena such as production on request, artificially triggered consumption and the advertisement of fictitious values sustaining the market. "But the publishing industry is different from the toothpaste industry in that it is made by men of culture working in it whose primary aim, in the best of cases, is not the production of a book to sell, but the production of values for the circulation of which the book seems the most appropriate means."³⁴¹ The "producers of culture" accept the publishing industry for aims that exceed its economic structure. The same discourse can

³⁴⁰ Cf. Robert Lumley's 'Introduction' to U. Eco, *Apocalypse Postponed*, pp. 1-14; and M. Caesar, *Umberto Eco. Philosophy, Semiotics, and the work of Fiction*, pp. 28-47.

³⁴¹ "Ma l'industria editoriale si distingue in questo dall'industria dei dentifrici: che vi sono inseriti uomini di cultura, per i quali il fine primario, nel migliore dei casi, non è la produzione di un libro da vendere, bensì la produzione di valori per la diffusione dei quali il libro appare lo strumento più comodo", U. Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*, p. 49. My translation.

be used for the proliferation of culture and ideas carried out by means of communication, “[h]ence the necessity of an active intervention on the part of cultural communities in the field of the mass communications”³⁴². Indeed, “fortunately, the community of the men of culture still constitutes a ‘pressure group’”.³⁴³ Boarini and Bonfiglioli see in Eco’s hopes for the “educational role” the man of culture can play within the mass communications system a residual element of the organic intellectual, that is, as yet another instance of its ‘misinterpretation’ in the post-war literary debate based on the conflation of the ‘people’ as an idea with the ‘public’, i.e. the mass of recipients. Within such a scenario, Gramsci’s thesis of the organic intellectual’s mediating role is “extrapolated from historical materialism, that is the ‘scientific’ instrument Gramsci indicates as the only [one] able to free the people from their prejudices and [are] inserted within the branch of semiotic disciplines.”³⁴⁴ In this shift of intellectual values determined by both technological progress and deep social changes, semiotics, communication and information theories are proclaimed as the new ‘sciences’ the man of letters is to understand and use critically in order not to fall back into an ‘aristocratic’, i.e. Adornian, condemnation of contemporary society and culture.

Apocalittici e integrati elevates strip cartoons to the status of cultural entities worthy of academic study. This could also be envisaged as a defiant ‘gesture’ towards the culture establishment. One needs only to think of Eco’s ironic use of a Latin quotation from Roger Bacon’s *Opus Majus* as the incipit introducing the essay on *Steve Canyon*:³⁴⁵ the two cultural ‘entities’, the erudite study in Medieval Latin and the strip cartoon in American English, are

³⁴² “[d]i qui la necessità di un intervento attivo comunità culturali, nel campo delle comunicazioni di massa”, U. Eco, *ibid.*, p 51. My translation.

³⁴³ “[l]a comunità degli uomini di cultura costituisce ancora, per fortuna, un ‘gruppo di pressione’”, *ibid.*, p 53. My translation.

³⁴⁴ “estrapolat[i] dal materialismo storico, cioè lo strumento “scientifico” indicato da Gramsci come il solo capace di liberare il popolo dai suoi pregiudizi, inserendol[i] nella classe delle discipline semiologiche”, V. Boarini and P. Bonfiglioli, *Avanguardia e restaurazione*, p. 514.

³⁴⁵ Umberto Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*, p 133.

put together regardless of their origins and symbolising two apparently irreconcilable cultural domains. Here, to define Eco's choice as a 'gesture' implies positing it within the tradition of the avant-garde. Even more than that, it also implies that not only has avant-garde art entered the academia, but also that it is officially sanctioned by it. With hindsight, the ironic effect deriving from such a provocatively 'careless' contiguity, i.e. from the apparent 'merging' of the 'high' and the 'low', may be envisaged as one of the first signs of the 'postmodern'. Such a hypothesis could be explored by means of a comparison between Umberto Eco's cultural project meant as an integral part of the Italian neo-avant-garde on the one hand and, on the other, the cultural project 'initiated' by Leslie Fiedler, that is, American postmodernism.

Leslie Fiedler's 'Death of *Avant-garde* Literature' was published one year after *Apocalittici e integrati*. The title of the article should not mislead the reader. By attacking the 'Avant-garde' Fiedler was actually attacking the typically formalistic claim of Modernist art to "offend[...] the philistine reader [...through] mere technique" alone. Within Fiedler's framework, modernism becomes "[h]ighbrow or truly experimental art aim[ing] at *insult*; and the aim of its typical language is therefore exclusion":³⁴⁶

Certainly, the devices which once characterized such art (the fractured narrative line, stream of consciousness, insistent symbolism, ironic allusion) seem today more banal than the well made plot, the set description that they were invented to displace.[...] No, if offence is still to be given, the good burghers still to be bugged, it must be done by ideas and not by techniques, a program of action rather than an aesthetic code.³⁴⁷

Fiedler's "program of action" was the reaffirmation of the classical avant-garde's project to reunite the artificially separated realms of high culture and popular culture. As pointed out by Andreas Huyssen, Fiedler "himself embodied the ethos of the classical avant-garde,

³⁴⁶ L. Fiedler, 'The Death of Avant-Garde Literature', *The Collected Essays*, vol. 2, p. 456.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 455-6.

American Style. [...] “American style” because Fiedler’s major concern was not to democratize “high art”; his goal was rather to validate popular culture and to challenge the increasing institutionalization of high art.”³⁴⁸

Fiedler’s validation of popular culture is part of a consistent strategy challenging modernist aesthetics,³⁴⁹ a strategy where his textual “*dispersal* of cultural authority”³⁵⁰ defiantly divests the texts of high culture of their privileged status. The opposite can be said of Eco’s intellectual endeavour. Here, the interworking of popular culture and ‘high’ modernist art yields results that are radically opposite to Fiedler’s ‘postmodernist’ cultural project. On the one hand, the validation of popular culture through semiology probably represents the most fundamental move away from the ideology of the Frankfurt School; and yet, on the other, such a move is contradicted by the fact that not only is modernist aesthetics left unchallenged, but it is also pushed yet to more ‘experimental’ extremes. Again, one should not forget that Eco’s notion of the open work takes hold in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

Fiedler’s strategic move is part of a tradition tending to destabilize the high/low opposition from within. Eco does problematize such opposition but does not do away with it. While validating popular culture, Eco is also re-working the ‘modernist’ project dismissed by Fiedler as shock on the recipient through “mere technique alone”. Their take on the notion of form becomes a platform enabling us to appreciate the gaping difference between Fiedler and Eco. Formal technique is still central to Eco’s argument: transformation of meanings happens primarily at the formal level, and that includes the level of aesthetic medium and decorum. From Eco’s perspective, the use of novel formal techniques implies a higher, more complex

³⁴⁸ A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, pp. 164-5.

³⁴⁹ Cf. R. Ceserani, *Raccontare il postmoderno*, especially pp. 29-42.

³⁵⁰ J. Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, p. 22.

level of meaning. This justifies the distinction between a more 'valuable' realm of *high* culture from *low* culture: formal technique can never be separated from semantic content. Indeed, formal technique becomes a deeper and more powerful level of semantic content.³⁵¹

There are some tendentially self-contradictory dynamics in Eco's overall cultural project. The monolithic idea of the culture industry as an instance of annihilation of subjective experience is labelled as 'apocalyptic'. Nevertheless, despite such condemnation, the whole idea of the open work potentially opening up an experience, understanding and "interpretation [... that is] personal, perspective, changeable, open"³⁵² all at once, i.e. irreducibly subjective, individualistic and unique, can be envisaged as a more or less conscious strategic reaction, elaborated on an aesthetic level, against the feared levelling and uniforming effects the culture industry could bear upon the subject's everyday experience. On the one hand, the idea of the culture industry is denied as an apocalyptic paranoid obsession and yet, on the other, the notion of the "open work" is theorized *ad hoc* as an actual instance of how Art can escape the 'levelling' effects of the culture industry. It is for this reason that 'experimentalism' – as meant by Eco and the neo-avant-garde – and 'high art' can actually be seen as synonyms. The battle for the *distinction* between popular culture and experimental art is played out at the level of the subject's experience: the latter claims a liberating role on the grounds of its alienating *formal* difference.

Eco is saying that although commodification invades cultural entities it does not completely debilitate them: the well-formed work can actually resist the threat of neutralization and it can do so through form alone, that is, through the subject's appreciation, made possible by his or her rationalist understanding, of the work's formal rationale.

³⁵¹ My thanks to John Frow for this insight.

³⁵² "interpretazione [...] personale, prospettica, mutevole, aperta", U. Eco, 'Due ipotesi sulla morte dell'arte', *La definizione dell'arte*, p. 273. My translation.

The 'fable' Eco tells in the early essay 'Avanguardia e sperimentalismo' may shed some light on how the well-formed work can escape the neutralizing logic of the culture industry. In an almost Edenic twist, the fable starts in the garden of a country house sumptuously decorated for a wedding. Eco tells us he is with a friend, an up-and-coming musician creating a 'son-et-lumiere' entertainment for the occasion. The friend, the fictional alter ego of the experimental musician Luciano Berio, has accepted the work because he needs the money but he is irritated by the grandiose display of wealth, so he takes revenge. At the height of the party, "with the guests swarming around the gardens having devoured a buffet of Pantagruelian proportions",³⁵³ from the microphones rise the notes of Mozart's K550, the Symphony no. 40 in G minor, to Eco's ears the most subtly tragic, despairing and disquieting of music. The friend's 'gesture' greatly irritates Eco:

I remember that my first reaction was one of irritation at the moral alibi which the musician was acquiring on the cheap – because if the music was being consumed cheerfully and distractedly while people were waffling canapés and drinking champagne, it really was being neutralized, emptied of any efficacy, being turned into court music because that was how it was being consumed by a distracted public. It really was an avant-garde on the point of turning into something merely academic.³⁵⁴

Eco's initial irritation gives way to the thought that, by writing off the music played and heard in this inappropriate context, he is not doing justice to the meaning of the Symphony, that is, to Mozart's vision of the world expressed through the formal structures organizing the Symphony. He also realizes that he is not doing justice to the possibility that somebody among the guests could actually sympathize with the mood of the Symphony:

³⁵³ I am here using Michael Caesar's translation, M. Caesar, *Umberto Eco. Philosophy, Semiotics and the Work of Fiction*, p. 33. For the original, see U. Eco, 'Avanguardia e sperimentalismo', *La definizione del'arte*, p. 251.

³⁵⁴ I am here using Michael Caesar's translation, M. Caesar, *Umberto Eco. Philosophy, Semiotics and the Work of Fiction*, p. 33. For the original, see U. Eco, 'Avanguardia e sperimentalismo', *La definizione del'arte*, pp. 251-2.

I could not and should not exclude the possibility that among the hundreds of people present in the park there might not be one who suddenly, stimulated perhaps by the minor mode, felt himself or herself in sympathy with that passage of music and who, through it, saw everything in a different light, the trees, the dancing, even their own presence there.³⁵⁵

Reduced to the core, Eco's argument is that a work of art manifests in its structures a certain vision of the world *notwithstanding the context of its fruition*. If one were to apply such an argument to the wider structures of the 'culture industry' one would say that the structure of art cannot be collapsed into that of the commodity: the meaning of Art is not affected – or at least not in a deterministic way – by its being the object of fully industrialized transactions. The defence of such position on 'musical' grounds is not casual as the anecdote is a more or less veiled criticism of the Theodor Adorno of *Philosophie der neuen Musik*.³⁵⁶

Eco's early critiques of the notions of 'culture industry' and 'mass culture' are finalized by the attempt to salvage the function and fruition of 'high art'. According to Michael Caesar, Eco's sortie into the sociology of culture and cultural anthropology of *Apocalittici e integrati* is inspired by a 'voluntaristic' spirit: "the motivation for all this lies at least in part in the pedagogic traditions of the Italian left. The aim (or at least the justification) is not only understanding, but also 'improvement' at some level (of messages themselves, or of us as decoders of the messages, for example)".³⁵⁷ Moreover, the same spirit is noticeable in Eco's attitude towards avant-garde art: "Eco's concern is to shift attention away from the supposedly alienating effects of the avant-garde itself to the way in which it exposes the workings of contemporary reality from within so as to enable the human subject

³⁵⁵ I am here using Michael Caesar's translation, *Umberto Eco. Philosophy, Semiotics and the Work of Fiction*, p. 35. For the original version, see U. Eco, 'Avanguardia e sperimentalismo', *La definizione dell'arte*, p. 252.

³⁵⁶ Adorno's *Filosofia della musica contemporanea* was first published in Italy in 1959, three years before Eco's 'Avanguardia e sperimentalismo'.

³⁵⁷ M. Caesar, *Umberto Eco. Philosophy, Semiotics and the Work of Fiction*, p. 40.

to understand or come to terms with them, to master them even, or at least to affect and manipulate them.”³⁵⁸

Eco’s optimistic ‘voluntarism’ allows for both disintegration of the fetish concept of ‘mass-culture’ and hope for art’s ‘factual’ effects upon the perceiver’s experience. Such voluntarism is based on the idea of an imaginary *Other*, a subject in need of – and constantly looking forward to – some sort of breakthrough in experience. The definition of such imaginary *Other* undergoes a continual referral and is ultimately left undertheorised by Eco.

³⁵⁹ Eco’s position – and more broadly, the neo-avant-garde’s stance – could be explained as a very self-contradictory hybrid made up of the project of the historical avant-garde and the supposedly emancipatory role of the Gramscian intellectual. The semiologist as a specific intellectual studying all forms of cultural messages is no longer strictly ‘organic’ and yet seems to be informed by a profound nostalgia for the politicality of Gramsci’s vision.

The necessity of contemporary ‘avant-garde’ art is estimated in relation to this imaginary *Other*’s need to be emancipated not by means of ‘political’ action strictly understood, but by means of a ‘cultural’ one. Paradoxically, according to Eco, the expansion of cultural goods and the multiplication of forms of popular culture – also determined by the expansion of the mass media and the culture industry – can have emancipatory effects too. The plain prose of *Apocalittici e integrati* explains this with the following example: “if in a situation of social tension I increase the workers’ pay, maybe this riformist solution may prevent them from occupying the factory. But if I teach a community of illiterate farmers how to read so that they can read ‘my’ political propaganda, then nothing will prevent them

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁵⁹ According to Caesar, a humanistic cast is present in all Eco’s system of thought and that would undermine semiotics as an intellectual enterprise by showing its major foible – the continual referral of the theorization of the notion of the subject. *Ibid.*, pp. 81-2.

from reading ‘others’ political propaganda too”.³⁶⁰ Eco is saying that the abundance of new forms of popular culture may guarantee – with the help of a democratic education system – a lively circulation of ideas that will eventually lead to ‘progressive’ developments. The *Other* Eco has in mind is not so ‘imaginary’ and can actually be circumstantiated both socially and historically: it is difficult not to see in the “community of illiterate farmers” some still very rural, dialectal and poor – especially if compared to other European countries, not to mention the United States – vast factions of Italian society of the post-war period where levels of illiteracy were discouragingly high. Given this situation, the advent of state television was saluted by the political élite as an amazingly powerful means of propaganda while some intellectuals saw it as yet another blow against more educative forms of culture and as an instance of massified, disposable and commodified culture corrupting the ‘masses’ by preventing them from understanding and approaching high culture. Alberto Moravia’s idea of the cinema confirms such an elitist position towards industrialized ‘popular’ culture: “[t]he surrogates industrial civilization produces to replace the novel are many. First of all the cinema [...but] it is obvious that the cinema will never tell us what Proust told us. And this is only an example”.³⁶¹ As opposed to such a vision, Eco is saying that beyond any ideological comprehension and instrumentalization, what the television *can actually do*, together with other forms of popular culture, is to open up a “process of progressive awareness that, once initiated, is no longer controllable by those who unleashed it.”³⁶² This is so because “on the level of the circulation of ideas, it never happens that an idea, even when it circulates in

³⁶⁰ “se in una situazione di tensione sociale aumento le paghe agli operai di una fabbrica, può darsi che questa soluzione riformistica distolga gli operai dall’occupare lo stabilimento. Ma se a una comunità agricola di analfabeti insegno a leggere affinché siano in grado di leggere i ‘miei’ proclami politici, nulla potrà impedire che questi uomini domani leggano i proclami ‘altrui’, U. Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*, p. 51. My translation.

³⁶¹ “[i] surrogati che la civiltà industriale propone di sostituire al romanzo sono numerosi. Prima di tutto il cinema [...ma] è evidente che il cinema non potrà mai dirci quello che ci ha detto Proust, tanto per fare un solo esempio”, A. Moravia, ‘9 domande sul romanzo’, in *Nuovi argomenti*, May-August 1959, n. 38-39, p. 39. Quoted from F. Pinto (ed.), *Intellettuali e tv negli anni '50*, p. 66.

³⁶² U. Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*, p. 51.

isolation, becomes a static reference point for pacified desires: on the contrary, it urges further elaboration.”³⁶³ The circulation of ideas through various cultural forms is considered positive, i.e., potentially educative, *per se*. The necessity of popular culture is measured against its potentially educational function: such a ‘humanist’ emancipatory claim is absent from American postmodernism because of the fundamental differences between Italian and American society: the latter was in no need either of a ‘literacy crusade’ or a mass communications system promoting a standardized national language against local dialects.

The effects of State television can be taken as an example: not only did the television fail to help the political élite to stay in power but, as pointed out by the linguist Tullio De Mauro, it also proved to be the most ‘democratic’ means for the teaching of Italian language because of the variety of examples of spoken language it offered, both formal and informal, literary and non-literary, and because it managed to expose some vast factions of dialectophone communities to the steady, regular flow of standard Italian, for the first time.

³⁶⁴ De Mauro also stresses how the principal aim of viewers with lower education is to learn through television: “*To get an education, to get an education even by watching Carosello, is [...] the consciouss aim of those watching television.*” ³⁶⁵ And yet, there are some very precise conditions for an educational use of the television message by the dialectophone or those who have had very little exposure to formal education: the linguistic message has to be simple and straightforward. As pointed out in a study carried out in the very early ‘60s – a survey among a community of farmers – “[i]f the discourse is simple, elementary, referred to facts or people that are known or are easily understandable, then it can be grasped and followed; otherwise, it flows as if nobody was getting it, and when it is reasonably

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁴ Cf. T. De Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita*, p. 456.

³⁶⁵ “*Istruirsi, istruirsi perfino guardando Carosello è [...] la finalità consapevole dell’ascolto della televisione*”, *ibid.* My translation.

interesting, then it is even perceived as annoying”;³⁶⁶ hence the immense success of the *sceneggiati* (television serials).

III. Conclusion

The easy everyday communication of the mass media, the simple, accessible and straightforward linguistic message as used in popular forms of culture such as the tv *sceneggiati* (television serial) – but also cinema, *fotoromanzi* (photo stories), sport magazines, cartoons, etc – played a vital and unprecedented role in the education of the people – the degree of education attained being proportional to the linguistic accessibility of those ‘lower’ forms of popular culture. Put within the terms of the linguist, “education is the corollary of linguistic accessibility: and it could not be otherwise [...as] ‘the linguistic sign lives by virtue of the speakers’ life’”.³⁶⁷ From an historical point of view, the expansion of the mass media system and the propagation of variegated forms of popular culture in Italy led to an improvement in and extension of the cultural life of vast factions of the nation. Far from impoverishing and depleting the recipients’ cultural and linguistic horizon, these popular forms of culture actually had the effect of broadening and diversifying it. Paradoxically, popular culture managed to have an educating function and this was made possible by means of its fundamental linguistic accessibility.

To a certain extent, discursive clarity, accessibility and lack of ambiguity can be envisaged as the constitutive characteristic of popular forms of culture whereas – as we have

³⁶⁶ “Se il discorso è semplice, elementare, riferito a fatti o persone conosciute o facilmente individuabili, può essere compreso ed è seguito, altrimenti scorre come se nessuno lo percepisse, e se presenta qualche stimolo accessibile, qua e là, che suscita interesse, irrita addirittura”, *ibid.* De Mauro bases his observations on surveys and interviews with the public made in the early ‘60s and is here quoting from a survey carried out among a community of farmers. My translation.

³⁶⁷ “l’accessibilità linguistica è collegata ad una concomitante azione di acculturazione, e non potrebbe essere altrimenti [... poiché] ‘il segno linguistico vive della vita dei parlanti’”, *ibid.* My translation.

seen in the first section of the present chapter – formal novelty, experimental technique and self-referentiality are the prerequisites of ‘high’ forms of culture, i.e. the avant-gardist and modernist work: for the latter, what matters is not *what* is said but *how* it is said. Andreas Huyssen has explained the dynamics constituting the realms of ‘high’ culture and ‘low’ culture (and indeed their very existence as separate entities) as the result of the “contamination anxiety” of the former. Modernist art and literature constitute themselves “through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture. Both the strengths and weaknesses of modernism as an adversary culture derive from that fact”.³⁶⁸ The identity of the high modernist, experimental work is dependent on the concept of mass culture as its *other*. High modernist art defines itself as a practice based on *internal* formal necessity alone. And yet, such self-definition is dependent on a negative re-elaboration of its *other*, the commodified cultural product of mass culture which is supposedly entirely determined by external economic necessity. These hidden distinction dynamics are at the core of modernism as a *regime* (or set) of aesthetic, artistic and formal values: in John Frow’s terms, a “high cultural regime”, performing the function of reinforcing “the discrepancy between aesthetic and economic discourses of value, as a way of designating aesthetic – that is, non-economic – value as a marker of status”.³⁶⁹

Remo Ceserani has justly said that the neo-avant-garde’s experimentalism is a late episode of avant-gardist formalism and modernism: this would suggest that the neo-avant-garde too takes part in the self-defining dynamics of modernism. We have seen these

³⁶⁸ A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, p. vii.

³⁶⁹ J. Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, p. 146.

dynamics at work in Umberto Eco's theorization of the 'open work' as an artefact expressing a protest that is entirely *internal*, *not external* (an aesthetic protest that can be clarified and understood through the interpretive intellectual labour of the reader); these dynamics can also account for Eco's voluntaristic belief that the meaning of Art is not affected, at least not in a deterministic way, by its being the object of fully industrialized transactions. The thesis that the neo-avant-garde takes part in modernist high cultural dynamics and practices is pursued further in the next chapter through an analysis of the poetry of the *novissimi* and their distinctive use of the technique of montage.

Chapter five: Poesia Novissima. The Value of Poetry

I. *Poesia Totale*: Poetry and the Intermedia in the 50s and the 60s.

The technological innovations of the '50s and '60s have profoundly altered poetical writing as a technique. The rational and visual act of reading poetry becomes an experience of sight, sounds, and colours. The traditional prosodic skills of the poet, his or her mastery of meter and rhythm, have become as important as not only his artistic skills, but also his technological and computer knowledge. All of a sudden, the figure of the poet as a literate and a humanist has become quaint, if not obsolete: thanks to technological advancement poetry has entered, in James Joyce's whimsical coinage, its "verbovisivocal"³⁷⁰ era. The new media seem an invaluable help to poetry, a genre usually relegated to the very margins of the culture industry, to increase its potential for impact and communicativeness. Marjorie Perloff sees John Cage's multimediatic innovation as the epitome of poetry's *en avant* of those years: "it was [John] Cage who understood, at least as early as the fifties, that from now on poetry would have to position itself, not vis-à-vis the landscape or the city or this or that political event, but in relation to the media that, like it or not, occupy an increasingly large part of our verbal, visual, and acoustic space".³⁷¹ Also, experiments like concrete, visual and technological poetry radically transform the relationship between poet and public: their closeness to the technique of the mass media expresses the poet's desire to make his product more accessible to the contemporary public.³⁷² As Adriano Spatola – a member of Gruppo 63, 'theoretician' and practitioner of "total poetry" – has pointed out, "The concrete poet [...]

³⁷⁰ J. Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 118.

³⁷¹ M. Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*, p. xiii.

³⁷² The first examples of concrete poetry were realized in Italy, Switzerland and Brazil in the late '40s and early '50s, roughly at the same time, by Carlo Belloli, Eugen Gomringer and the Noigandres group respectively. The artistic and theoretical precedents are to be found in Futurism, but also in Plastic Concretism, Ezra Pound and James Joyce.

uses words *as* images, while the visual poet makes use of words *and* images”.³⁷³ Despite stylistic differences, they both produce a kind of “poetry that, in order to exist, needs a prolonged and explicit contact with extra-literary reality”.³⁷⁴ For the poet, poetry “first of all becomes the way of participating into a new sociological dimension of the arts that are finally to be made active towards the world.”³⁷⁵ Concrete poetry particularly draws its new expressive energy and stylistic efficacy from the treatment of visual space characterizing architecture, painting, sculpture and, especially graphic design and advertisement. The contiguity of images, words and letters makes the linguistic system lose its logocentric rationalistic structure. As René Magritte states, “Dans un tableau, les mots sont de la même substance que les images”.³⁷⁶ The poet’s perception of the substantial inadequacy of language as a ‘monodimensional’ structure solely based on grammar and syntax lies at the core of the ‘multimediality’ of the new technological ‘total poetry’ of the neo-avant-gardes of the 50s and 60s. As an overall phenomenon, these multimediatric experiments are fundamentally anti-logocentric and posit a radical challenge to poetry as an instance of discourse.

The concrete poet Eugen Gomringer gives a ‘hedonistic’ instance of the reasons for the inadequacy of poetry as a discursive genre in the face of the contemporary man’s everyday experience of the world:

The new means of communication [...] have considerably contributed to intensify the individual’s feeling of omnipresence. Those who listen to the radio or watch the television identify their ear or eye with them, and imagine to have a personal relationship with the things they [radio and television] treat. This imaginary attitude

³⁷³ “Il poeta concreto [...] usa le parole *come* immagini, mentre il poeta visivo si serve delle parole *e* delle immagini”. A. Spatola, *Verso la poesia totale*, p. 31. My translation.

³⁷⁴ “poesia che per esistere ha bisogno del contatto prolungato ed esplicito con la realtà extraletteraria”, *ibid.*

³⁷⁵ “soprattutto il modo di partecipare a una dimensione sociologica nuova delle arti, finalmente da rendere attive nei confronti del mondo”, *ibid.*, p. 32. My translation.

³⁷⁶ R. Magritte, ‘Les mots et les images’, p. 32.

exempts them from distinguishing the possible from the impossible, supposition from reality, today from yesterday. All differences disappear and things that are alike become the same thing. The present indicative dominating the language of the radio and of the television feigns the objectivity of the information the contemporary individual is used to invoke. And yet, in doing so, one does not take into account that “objectivity” means a rethinking of as much quantity as possible of possibility, and not merely linguistic tautological reproduction of the extant.³⁷⁷

In a hedonistic and sensual move that is reminiscent of Marinetti’s *socio-technological* understanding of Art, Gomringer envisages radio and television as the inter-subjective extension and augmentation of the sensuous capacity of the body. For the concrete poet, the means of mass communication are a prolongation of the individual’s eye and ear, in short, of his or her sensual experience. Nevertheless, the ‘total art’ of the neo-avant-gardes takes distance from the Futurist precedent by means of their theoretical and formal articulation of the critique of the ideological function and manipulation of the mass media. The latter is not uncritically reproduced but systematically subverted.

³⁷⁷ “I nuovi mezzi di comunicazione [...] hanno contribuito in maniera considerevole a intensificare nell’individuo il sentimento della sua onnipresenza. Chi ascolta la radio o guarda la televisione identifica in esse il suo orecchio o il suo occhio, e immagina di avere un rapporto personale con le cose di cui esse trattano. Questo atteggiamento fantastico lo esime dal distinguere tra il possibile e l’impossibile, tra le supposizioni e la realtà, tra l’ieri e il domani. Scompaiono così tutte le differenze, le cose simili diventano la stessa cosa. L’indicativo presente che predomina nel linguaggio della radio e della televisione finge quell’obiettività d’informazione che l’individuo della nostra epoca è abituato a invocare. Così facendo, però, non si tiene conto del fatto che “obiettività” significa ripensamento della maggior quantità possibile di possibilità, e non riproduzione tautologica e meramente linguistica dell’esistente.” Quoted from A. Spatola, *Verso la poesia totale*, p. 33. Spatola gives no reference. My translation.

II. *Poesia Novissima*.

When the critic approaches the Novissimi by starting from the vantage point of the 'multimedia' and the technological challenges to poetry as a discursive genre, their poetical experimentation looks irremediably 'traditional' at first and, from a certain point of view, even 'elitist'. The Novissimi poets Edoardo Sanguineti, Nanni Balestrini, Elio Pagliarani, Alfredo Giuliani and Antonio Porta oppose the all-enveloping "totalizing gesture" of the new multimediatric 'total poetry' by putting forward an uncompromisingly anti-hedonistic treatment of the verbal material, by severing "any connection with the tradition of poetry as seduction"³⁷⁸ and by elaborating, in Alfredo Giuliani's words, a "versification free of hedonism".³⁷⁹ For the novissimo, the subject's experience 'happens' in and through language: "the real can only be found in poetry as the object of that process that is language."³⁸⁰ According to this (almost) Lacanian perspective, the poet's task is to increase the linguistic vitality of poetry meant as "a linguistic relationship of meanings formed in a given time and space".³⁸¹ Not only is poetry as a discursive construct influenced by the historical situation, it also modifies it. As a textual praxis, poetry "is the act returning linguistic authenticity to the world and in this it participates in the [political] praxis that is the authentic modification of the world [...]".³⁸² As Alfredo Giuliani writes in the 'historic' first introduction to *I novissimi*,

³⁷⁸ "ogni legame con la tradizione della poesia come *seduzione*", F. Curi, *Metodo, storia strutture*, p. 207. My translation.

³⁷⁹ A. Giuliani, 'Introduction' to *I Novissimi* [Eng], p. 25; "versificazione priva di edonismo" 'Introduzione' a *I novissimi*, p. xix.

³⁸⁰ A. Giuliani, 'Introduction' (1965) to the second edition of *I Novissimi. Poetry for the Sixties*, p. 56.

³⁸¹ "una relazione linguistica di significati costituitasi in un determinato contesto spaziotemporale". F. Curi, *Ordine e disordine*, p. 12. My translation.

³⁸² "è l'atto che restituisce autenticità linguistica al mondo, e in ciò partecipa della praxis che è modificazione autentica del mondo [...]". *Ibid.*, p. 13. My translation.

[t]he aim of “true contemporary poetry,” ... “is to increase vitality” ... Being neither classicists nor crepuscular poets we have a linguistic concept of vitality that we shall attempt to explain. Undoubtedly in every age poetry cannot be “true” unless it is contemporary”; and if we ask ourselves, contemporary with what?, we meet with a single response: with our sense of reality, or rather with the language that reality speaks within us by its irreconcilable signs. The said *increase* comes from an opening, a shock, which puts within our grasp an occurrence in which we may find ourselves once more.³⁸³

Giuliani’s linguistic concept of vitality ascribes maximum importance to the renewal of poetry through formal evolution – in versification, diction, syntax and meter. It takes distance from literary tradition – and yet, does not iconoclastically deny it – by “treat[ing] common language with the same intensity as if it were the poetic language of tradition, and [by] hav[ing] the latter be measured against contemporary life”.³⁸⁴ The linguistic vitality of a poem can only be measured against its capacity for shock, its ability to open up a linguistic, and thus ideological dimension that is *other* than that of the everyday: “A poem is vital when it forces us beyond its own inevitable limits, that is, when the things that have inspired its words induce in us the sense of other things and other words, prompting our intervention; one ought to profit from a poem as one would from some rather extraordinary encounter”.³⁸⁵ Giuliani’s introduction-manifesto is inspired by a formalistic vision of the poetic work that, in its attempt for innovation, “jars with its literary code, which maintains the inertia of things,

³⁸³ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 19; “[s]copo della “vera contemporanea poesia”, [...] è di accrescere la vitalità [...] Noi, che non siamo classicisti e nemmeno crepuscolari, abbiamo della vitalità un concetto linguistico che cercheremo di spiegare. Senza dubbio, in ogni epoca la poesia non può essere “vera” se non è “contemporanea”; e se ci domandiamo: – a che cosa? – la risposta è una sola: al nostro sentimento della realtà, ovvero alla lingua che la realtà parla in noi con i suoi segni inconciliabili. Quell’accrescimento verrà da una apertura, da uno choc che ci metta a portata di mano un accadere in cui possiamo ritrovarci”, ‘Introduzione’ a *I novissimi*, p. xiii.

³⁸⁴ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 27; “tratta[ndo] la lingua comune con la stessa intensità che se fosse la lingua poetica della tradizione [...] porta[ndo] quest’ultima a misurarsi con la vita contemporanea”, ‘Introduzione’ a *I novissimi*, p. xx.

³⁸⁵ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 25. “Una poesia è vitale quando ci spinge oltre i propri inevitabili limiti, quando cioè le cose che hanno ispirato le sue parole ci inducono il senso di altre cose e di altre parole, provocando il nostro intervento; si deve poter profittare di una poesia come di un incontro un po’ fuori dell’ordinario”, ‘Introduzione’ a *I novissimi*, p. xix.

and institutes *the abuse of the habitual* (the fictitious “that’s how it is”) in a vision of human relations”.³⁸⁶ Nevertheless, such formalistic vision is not an end in itself: the linguistic concept of vitality is subtly, and yet consistently, exhortative: “What poetry *does* is precisely its “content”: if, let’s say, it induces sighs or boredom, its truth is ultimately the reader’s sigh or tedium. And in periods of crisis the *way of making* coincides totally with *meaning*.”³⁸⁷ The hortatory style of the manifesto as a genre (the exhortation justified and caused by the ‘sense of a crisis’, i.e. the inevitable apocalyptic feature of all manifestoes) is transferred on to the poetic “open work”, where “*making* [...] coincides with content”³⁸⁸. This is possible when, by means of a radical re-working of his own subjectivity, the “open” writer objectifies himself by establishing a semantic relationship with the reader (a relationship *not* based on the reader’s identification with the writer’s autobiographical facts). The writer’s subjectivity is *objectified* in the text, his subjectivity is *semanticised*: “the ‘open’ writer ... tends to leave the initiative to the rapport that will be created in the encounter of two semantic dispositions, that of the text, and that of the reader”.³⁸⁹ By “open” writer is meant “objective” writer: his or her *écriture* goes beyond the characteristics of a personal style stemming from a private subjectivity. In his *Le degré zero de l’écriture*, Roland Barthes defines this degree zero of

³⁸⁶ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 23; “urta [...] contro il suo codice letterario, che conserva l’inerzia delle cose, e istituisce l’*abuso di consuetudine* (il fittizio “è così”) nella visione dei rapporti umani”, ‘Introduzione’ a *I Novissimi*, p. xvi.

³⁸⁷ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 21. The English translation of this passage does not take into consideration Giuliani’s reference to U. Eco’s ‘Del modo di fare come impegno della realtà’ and translates “modo di fare” with “*modus operandi*” whereas I translate it as “way of making”. “Ciò che la poesia fa è precisamente il suo “contenuto”: se, poniamo, fa sospirare o annoia, la sua verità è definitivamente, il sospiro o il tedio del lettore. E nei periodi di crisi il *modo di fare* coincide interamente col *significato*”, ‘Introduzione’ a *I novissimi*, p. xv.

³⁸⁸ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 25. As before, the English translation of “*fare*” as “*activity*” does not take into account Giuliani’s subtext. For this reason, I translate it as “*making*”; “quel *fare*, che [...] sentiamo coincidere con il ‘contenuto’”, ‘Introduzione’ a *I novissimi*, p. xviii.

³⁸⁹ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 25; “lo scrittore “aperto” [...] inclina a lasciare l’iniziativa al rapporto che si creerà nell’incontro tra due disposizioni semantiche, quella del testo e l’altra, appunto, che appartiene a chi legge”, ‘Introduzione’ a *I novissimi*, p. xix.

writing as “un acte de solidarité historique”,³⁹⁰ a precise choice on the part of the writer, a final and concrete objectification of the horizon of abstract possibilities offered by the *langue*.³⁹¹

The “total poet” and the “novissimo poet” seem to employ two radically diverging strategies in order to pursue the same aim, the poetic re-vitalization of the social word constantly reified by extant linguistic communication. An instance of the formal position of the former is given by the Noigandres’ “pilot-plan for concrete poetry”- I am treating concrete poetry as an international movement as also suggested by Adriano Spatola in his *Verso la poesia totale*. According to Décio Pignatari, Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, concrete poetry is the “product of a critical evolution of forms. by assuming the end of the historical cycle of the verse (rhythmic and formal unit) concrete poetry begins by being aware of graphic space as a structural agent”.³⁹² (Similarly, with sound poetry, the acoustic aspect becomes a ‘structuring’ agent, and so on). Technological and structural research draws its origin from acceptance of the historical demise of the verse and the ensuing need for its implementation by means of other media, not least the techniques of the means of mass communication. As opposed to this stance, for the “novissimo” poet there is no *elsewhere*, in terms of media, other than the given *langue*: the subject’s experience happens in and through language. But even poetry cannot be considered as the subject’s original creation. Words, and also the poetic word belonging to the literary tradition, do not allow for an authentic experience of the real. And yet, to resolve the word’s loss of capacity for contact by

³⁹⁰ R. Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l’écriture*, p. 14.

³⁹¹ “Il n’est pas donné à l’écrivain de choisir son écriture dans une sorte d’arsenal intemporel des formes littéraires. C’est sous la pression de l’Histoire et de la Tradition, que s’établissent les écritures possibles d’un écrivain donné [...] l’écriture n’est pas nullement un instrument de communication [...] elle est une contre-communication”. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-8.

³⁹² “poesia concreta: produto de uma evolução crítica de formas. dando por encerrado o ciclo histórico do verso (unidade rítmico-formal), a poesia concreta começa por tomar conhecimento do espaço gráfico como agente estrutural”. A. de Campos, D. Pignatari, H. de Campos, ‘plano-piloto para poesia concreta’, p. 156. My translation.

supplementing it with technological media and devices would mean yet a further mystification of the *langue*, exactly the same mystification the mass media daily perpetrates. There is no easy 'hedonistic' (*sensual*: with colours, sounds etc) way out of the conundrum that the words violated in daily use are both a hindrance to and a vehicle for the experience of the real – Giuliani defines the "novissimi"s anti-hedonistic treatment of the verbal material "as 'retaliation' against the words violated by the consumption" of the everyday.³⁹³

In concrete poetry the poem, a structure of words, aspires to the immediacy and simultaneity of iconic, visual language. *Poesia novissima* is characterized instead by a sense of temporal depth, also meant as the long duration of the process of interpretation.³⁹⁴ Nevertheless, despite their diverging points of view with regard to the relationship between poetry as a genre and technological progress, the Novissimo *open poet's* appeal to the concept of linguistic vitality and the visual-concrete *total poet's* use of the intermedia basically pursue the same aim: "to make poetry exit that 'hiding-hole' that the book has now become in order to posit it" competitively, one could say, and on the level of its efficacy "at the level of the means of mass communication".³⁹⁵

³⁹³ "come "rappresaglia" contro le parole violate dal consumo". A. Giuliani, *Autunno del Novecento*, p. 232. My translation.

³⁹⁴ Roland Barthes explains the long duration of the word within modern poetry as follows: "Dans la poétique moderne [...] les mots produisent une sorte de continu formel dont émane peu à peu une densité intellectuelle ou sentimentale impossible sans eux; la parole est alors le temps épais d'une gestation plus spirituelle, pendant laquelle la "pensée" est préparée, installée peu à peu par le hasard des mots. Cette chance verbale, d'où va tomber le fruit mûr d'une signification, suppose donc un temps poétique qui n'est plus celui d'une 'fabrication', mais celui d'une aventure possible, la rencontre d'un signe et d'une intention." R. Barthes, *Le degré zero de l'écriture*, pp. 34-5.

³⁹⁵ "fare uscire la poesia da quel 'nascondiglio' che ormai rappresenta il libro per collocarla al livello dei mezzi di comunicazione di massa", L. Pignotti, 'La poesia visiva'; I am quoting from G. Zanchetti, 'Esploratori di parole', p. 31. My translation.

III. Montage: A Technique Common to both *Poesia Novissima* and *Poesia Totale*.

When analyzing the relationship between *poesia novissima* and *poesia totale*, critics are usually prone to highlighting more differences than similarities and yet the two seem inextricably linked. In his comprehensive yet detailed study of the poetics of the Italian neo-avant-garde of the 60s, *Letteratura e caos*, Lucio Vetri introduces the relationship between the two components of the Italian neo-avant-garde by characteristically warning that “The former [is] of more depth and amplitude of articulation and deserves a prominent position”³⁹⁶ whereas the latter – the technological poets belonging to Gruppo 63 but also those of Gruppo 70 – is only of secondary relevance. According to Vetri, the following features set the two poles apart:

– on the one hand, “schizomorphic poetry” [*poesia novissima*] proceeds from the “calculated disorder”³⁹⁷ of language (by means of combination, “multiplicity” and “discontinuity”³⁹⁸ of linguistic levels and different languages; by means of the “interruption of the syntactic contiguity”³⁹⁹ and “mutilation of syntagms”⁴⁰⁰; by means of an abnormal use of the grammatical, metrical and prosodic structures), by activating “a work of semantic negation” responsible for the institution of meanings [*sensi*] that are not assimilated by the code, [of] abnormal meanings or non-meanings and so on”;

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³⁹⁶ “L’una [è] di maggior spessore e ampiezza d’articolazione, [le] spetta una posizione preminente”, L. Vetri, *Letteratura e caos. Poetiche della “neo-avanguardia” italiana degli anni sessanta*, p. 133. My translation.

³⁹⁷ “disordinazione calcolata”, L. Vetri is quoting from F. Leonetti, ‘L’eversione costruita’, p. 280. My translation.

³⁹⁸ “molteplicità”, “discontinuità”, L. Vetri is quoting from F. Curi, ‘La “distruzione del modello lineare” e la nuova letteratura d’avanguardia’, *Metodo, storia, strutture*, p. 185. My translation.

³⁹⁹ “interruzione della contiguità sintattica”, L. Vetri is quoting from F. Curi, ‘Poetica del nuovo terrore’, *Metodo, storia, strutture*, p. 212. My translation.

⁴⁰⁰ “mutilazione dei sintagmi”, *ibid.* My translation.

⁴⁰¹ “lavoro di negazione semantica, responsabile dell’istituzione o di sensi non assimilabili al codice, o di sensi aberranti, o di non sensi e via dicendo”. L. Vetri is quoting from S. Agosti, ‘Due sistemi in relazione’. My translation.

– on the other hand, “technological poetry”⁴⁰² chooses to work on the mystifying linguistic universe of the mass communications, retraces the formal modulations (lexical and constructive) of the latter, extrapolates excerpts (whole sentences and pieces) and makes a montage following unusual and improbable combinations. In this way – thanks to extraction from the habitual context and to eccentric combinations – the enunciations of the various “sectorial languages”⁴⁰³ through which mass communication (the language of politics and advertising) takes place, assumes new meanings different from the original ones.⁴⁰⁴

Vetri’s description of the diverging technical processes giving form to the two kinds of poetry is detailed and well-sourced, and yet it seems oblivious of the deep structural relationship between words such as “mutilation”, “contiguity”, “interruption” and “combination” on the one side and “montage”, “extraction”, and “combinations” on the other – these words all being attempts at describing the one technique that is actually common to both “schizomorphic poetry” and “total poetry”, that is, the technique of assemblage, or montage.

The nature of the relationship between the two kinds of poetry seems to change dramatically once the researcher temporarily ‘dismisses’ the claim of the literary critic to pay attention also to the art critic – avant-garde art is an inter-semiotic/inter-mediatic phenomenon after all. According to Giorgio Zanchetti, one of the curators of the exhibition on *La parola nell’arte: Ricerche d’avanguardia nel ‘900. Dal Futurismo a oggi attraverso le collezioni del Mart* (2007-8), the technique of assemblage can be considered the thread of Ariadne giving continuity to the renovation of artistic language carried out by the avant-gardes between the last years of the 19th century and the first 15 years of the 20th century (starting from Mallarmé, leading to the Futurists’ *paroliberismo*, Pablo Picasso and Georges

⁴⁰² “poesia tecnologica”. L. Verri is here quoting the definition invented by L. Pignotti. Cf. L. Pignotti, ‘La poesia tecnologica’. My translation.

⁴⁰³ L. Vetri is here referring to G. L. Beccaria (ed.), *I linguaggi settoriali in Italia*.

⁴⁰⁴ L. Vetri, *Letteratura e caos*, pp. 135-6. See above for the sources of the quotations.

Braque's *papiers collés*, and Guillaume Apollinaire's support of Cubism).⁴⁰⁵ Moreover, "it is from the montage – from the unexpected amalgamation of different inspirations and concepts, but also from the paratactic combination of linguistic elements taken from different contexts – that the renovated series of verbovisual exercises of the second avant-gardes draws its origin."⁴⁰⁶ The technique of montage or assemblage is common to the experimentation on the poetic word from Mallarmé to the neo-avant-gardes of the 50s and 60s, Novissimi, included: "After 40 years, the structural and "technological" research of the poets of Gruppo 63 (particularly with the verbovisual collages by Alfredo Giuliani, Antonio Porta and Nanni Balestrini [...]) appears only superficially opposed to the Florence-based Gruppo 70" and other examples of total poetry.⁴⁰⁷ Zanchetti is here referring not only to the *modus operandi* of the Novissimi, but also to their production of verbovisual collages – present in the exhibition and made by using newspaper articles and deadlines – such as Alfredo Giuliani's *A Cuba* (60s-70s), Antonio Porta's *Il grande affanno* (1964) and especially Nanni Balestrini's series of *Cronogrammi* (60s-70s). If we go back to literary criticism, we see that the influence of the technique of the montage on twentieth century literature and art is so overwhelming that, according to Edoardo Sanguineti, the last century can actually be defined as "il secolo del montaggio" [The century of the montage].⁴⁰⁸ The twentieth century was the century of the avant-gardes and of the cinema, that is, of the montage technique – montage meant as

⁴⁰⁵ Cf. G. Zanchetti, 'Esploratori di parole'. Zanchetti is here referring to W.C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, especially. p. 13. For an overall view on the montage technique see D. Scheunemann, 'On Photography and Painting. Prolegomena to a New Theory of the Avant-Garde', in D. Scheunemann (ed.), *European Avant-Garde: New Perspectives*, Amsterdam, Roopi, 2000, pp. 15-48, *passim*.

⁴⁰⁶ "E di nuovo dal montaggio – dall'accostamento inopinato di spunti e concetti diversi, ma anche dalla giunzione paratattica di elementi linguistici prelevati da differenti contesti – procede in gran parte la serie rinnovata degli esercizi verbovisuali delle seconde avanguardie". G. Zanchetti, 'Esploratori di parole', p. 26. My translation.

⁴⁰⁷ "Solo superficialmente contrapposta appare poi, ormai a distanza di oltre quarant'anni, la ricerca strutturale e 'tecnologica' dei poeti del Gruppo 63 (in particolare con i collage verbovisuali di Alfredo Giuliani, di Antonio Porta e di Nanni Balestrini [...]) e del Gruppo 70 di Firenze", i.e. Eugenio Piccini, Lamberto Pignotti, Michele Perfetti, Luci Marcucci, Luciano Ori. *Ibid.*, p. 29. My translation.

⁴⁰⁸ E. Sanguineti, 'Il secolo del montaggio', in *La poesia italiana del Novecento. Modi e tecniche*.

aesthetic *modus operandi* expressing and advocating an essentially political world view, the systematic aspiration to bring fragmentation and disorder into society and human relationships. The aesthetics of the cinema as a medium has replaced the mental model of orderly syntax arranged according to linear sequences with the mental model of 'the end of syntax': "syntax is over, the syntax of our way of thinking the world is over: montage is born".⁴⁰⁹ Montage is a mental system and a system of organization: "One can call it estrangement, displacement or, more precisely, montage: it is the end of syntax, codes, hierarchy, it is the possibility to introduce disorder into the world".⁴¹⁰ The aim of such a displacement would be to accentuate the fact that "in this world [...] there are only conflicts among social groups, or class conflicts".⁴¹¹

From the point of view of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of Art, the insurmountable difference the literary critic sees between "schizomorphic poetry", based on linguistic collage, and "total poetry", based on the assemblage of words *and* other media, is the effect of the distinction-mark logic governing the field of literary production, and especially avant-garde art with its brand-like schools and definitions. The "intermedia chart" drawn by Dick Higgins is daunting: concrete poetry, poesia visiva, sound poetries, object poems, visual novels, Fluxus, action music, graphic music, notations, science art, dance theatre, happenings, mail art, conceptual art and performance art.⁴¹² Rather than being dismissed though, such distinction-mark logic should be seen as the result of the ideological *habitus* of the 'contenders'.

As early as the late-seventies, Maria Corti pointed out that one of the first difficulties

⁴⁰⁹ "è finita la sintassi, è finita la sintassi del nostro modo di pensare il mondo, è nato il montaggio", *ibid.*, p. 245. My translation.

⁴¹⁰ "lo si chiami straniamento, lo si chiami spaesamento, lo si chiami precisamente montaggio, è la fine della sintassi, dei codici, dellearchie, è la possibilità di disordinare il mondo", *ibid.* My translation.

⁴¹¹ "a questo mondo [...] non vi sono che conflitti di gruppi sociali, o conflitti di classe", *ibid.* My translation.

⁴¹² D. Higgins, 'Intermedia', p. 50.

the critic of the Italian neo-avant-garde has to face, is the decision to make or not to make a methodological distinction between the critical apparatus produced by members on the one side and the one produced by non-members on the other.⁴¹³ To re-posit the problem after thirty years means to call into question the unmentionable, that is, the members' thorough occupation of both the academic space and the publishing industry allowing for the hegemonic position of their 'internal' *self-canonizing* activity. Edoardo Sanguineti defiantly expressed ideological awareness of the abnormal peculiarity of such a situation by openly stating – at the conference held in 2003 in Bologna for the celebration 40th year from the foundation of Gruppo 63 – “we were interested [...] in universites, newspapers, radio-television, [...] in short] cultural hegemony. That was the kind of power we were interested in.”⁴¹⁴

The issue at stake between “schizomorphic poetry” and “total poetry” seems to be the primacy of the radical demystification (through artistic formalization) of the exchange-functional language as used by the mass media. Fausto Curi has consistently and energetically pointed out in more than one occasion that total poetry falls short of such intent. In 1964 Curi writes:

It is necessary to acknowledge that the very strong pressure technology and industrial reality exercise on our life is not enough to make them *immediately* the object of an artistic experience [...] for technological art to exist, technological reality must become an artistically objectified and linguistically usable reality. And in order for this to happen it is necessary that the technological world be part of the dialectics of artistic situations, that is, of a dialectics of historically constituted forms. Otherwise one runs

⁴¹³ “la neoavanguardia italiana degli anni sessanta [...] parlarne oggi offre delle effettive difficoltà [tra cui] la situazione emorragica della bibliografia, sia nel campo di Carlomagno che in quello d'Agramante; gli infedeli, al limite, si può anche ignorarli o conoscerne solo i capi, ma tra i fedeli ci sono loro stessi, gli autori del movimento, la cui vasta attività è proficua”. M. Corti, *Il viaggio testuale*, p. 111. My translation.

⁴¹⁴ “eravamo interessati [...] all'università, ai giornali, alla radiotelevisione [...] egemonia culturale. Quello era il potere che ci interessava”, E. Sanguineti in *Il Gruppo 63 quarant'anni dopo*, ed. R. Barilli, F. Curi, N. Lorenzini, p. 84. My translation.

the risk of regression.⁴¹⁵

The spectre of Futurism (*the regression*) is kept at bay by means of a clear distinction between the 'high' (the result of a *dialectics of historically constituted forms* and the formal innovation their succession produces, i.e., 'high' art, *Modernism*) and the 'low' (the immediate result of *industrial reality*, the mass media, cultural forms linked to and determined by economic necessity, i.e., popular forms culture of culture, or 'mass' culture).

An understanding of "schizomorphic poetry" as essentially opposed to "technological poetry" fails to explain organically the relationship between the early (schizomorphic) poems by Porta, Giuliani and Balestrini and their later verbovisual productions. Such a stance seems unable to integrate organically the formal rationale of some of Nanni Balestrini's early poems together with the overall aesthetic project of the Novissimi. (Similarly, it fails to account for Balestrini's "systematic amplification of his way of writing towards an object-like dimension and, sometimes, an environmental dimension",⁴¹⁶ an amplification consistent with his early production.)

IV. The use of the Montage in Poesia Novissima

For the Novissimi, the montage technique was the device *the age demanded* in order to express, in Alfredo Giuliani's words, the "schizomorphic" vision by which "contemporary poetry gains a grip on itself and present-day life". *Asyntactical* montage disrupts the habitual linearity and predictability of mental processes (images of reality *vitalistically* aroused by the sign as a physical presence) by means of the "the violent treatment of signs." The linguistic

⁴¹⁵ "Bisogna riconoscere che non basta la fortissima pressione che la realtà industriale e il mondo tecnologico esercitano sulla nostra vita a renderli *immediatamente* oggetto di esperienze artistiche ... perché possa sussistere un'arte tecnologica occorre che la realtà tecnologica diventi una realtà artisticamente intenzionabile e linguisticamente fruibile. E perché ciò accada occorre che il mondo tecnologico si inserisca nella dialettica delle situazioni artistiche, e cioè in una dialettica di forme storicamente costituite." F. Curi, 'Nota sull'arte tecnologica', *Ordine e disordine*, pp. 113-4, author's italics. My translation.

⁴¹⁶ "a un sistematico ampliamento del proprio intervento scrittoriale in dimensione oggettuale e, talvolta, ambientale". G. Zanchetti, 'Esploratori di parole', p. 29. My translation.

sign becomes a material, corporeal object, the result of the poet's vivisection of the *langue*: the latter is "a mad device" (Guglielmi) and a false mechanism that is to be disbanded, neutralized, *objectified*, cut into pieces and finally re-assembled on the white page by means of the dissacratory poetical operation subverting (literally putting *up-side-down*, Duchamp docet) any given pre-existing meaning. The metaphysical dimension of the sign is systematically denied and rejected. The sign is an end in itself, the instrument for the exploration of language, the material occasion for, in Niva Lorenzini's words, a "second degree realism, [meant] as the *knowledge* of language, as *exploration* of language."⁴¹⁷ The corporality of the word – its isolated *thingness* as the piece of that dismembered body that is the linguistic universe now dead – makes a parody of the edenic condition of language. The word is just that, a word endowed with as many meanings as it may have in a dictionary, reduced to its degree zero. In poesia novissima, the notion of the degree zero of language coalesces with that of the montage. The verbal material is torn out from its original context and becomes a fragment, an unrelated *parole* disrupting the structural (syntactic) organization of the *langue*. If it is true that the linguistic system is the transposition of a series of social relationships and that the organization of social relationships happens through language, then the un-related word becomes the symbol of the alienated individual who does not fit in the totality of social intercourse. The montage is part of the project of re-foundation of Poetry as immanently opposed to *social language* and is the material entity making up the many different poetical masks of the poeti Novissimi. Language is objectified (made the physical, concrete object for investigation) and acknowledged as a social imposition coming from the *outside*. The *lyrical subjectivity* (that once belonged to the crepuscular poet) is replaced by a linguistic *mask* made up of heteronomous debris, quotations from old literary texts, pieces of

⁴¹⁷ "Realismo [...] di secondo grado, come *conoscenza* del linguaggio, *esplorazione* del linguaggio". N. Lorenzini, *Il laboratorio della poesia*, p. 9. My translation.

everyday language, fragments of nonsense from mediatic information, disjointed poetical images: verbal material objectively vivisected for the sake of linguistic knowledge in *the laboratory of poetry*.

V. Edoardo Sanguineti *

In Edoardo Sanguineti's long poems *Laborintus* and *Erotopaegnia*, poetry becomes the nocturnal, oneiric, marginal (marginalized because socially unacceptable) experience of a self-confessed "fragile erotomane platonico, inibito pornografo: un poeta)", that is, "(...fragile platonic sexmaniac, inhibited pornographer: a poet)"⁴¹⁸. Sanguineti's Sadean mask as a repressed voyeur and pornographer is *assembled* along the line of the selection of the literary *already there* making up the corpus of the poems, "ritagliato / e incollato e illustrato con documentazioni viscerali" ("cut out / and glued and illustrated with visceral documentation", *Laborintus*, sec. 1).⁴¹⁹ The symbols present in *Laborintus* may be unrelated on a syntactical level but they all point towards the theme of the alchemic *regressus ad uterum*, the return to the womb: "i nani extratemporalì" ("the extratemporal dwarfs") i.e. the alchemical homunculi as a mental projection (sec. 1); the "Palus Putrtedinis", i.e. the swamp of putrefaction containing all the potentialities of the primordial stage of life; the "phlogiston" allowing for the transmutation of metals. The journey into the womb "tenue corpo di peccaminose escrescenze" ("soft body of sinful excrescences", sec. 1) symbolizes a primeval state of innocence, a 360-degree artistic consciousness, the artist's transmutation of

* Unless otherwise specified, the poems by Edoardo Sanguineti, Nanni Balestrini, Elio Pagliarani, Alfredo Giuliani and Antonio Porta analyzed in this chapter are quoted from A. Giuliani (ed.), *I novissimi. Poetry for the '60s*.

⁴¹⁸ E. Sanguineti, *Reisebilder*, sec.16. *Catamerone 1951-1971*. My translation.

⁴¹⁹ A. Giuliani (ed.), *I Novissimi. Poetry for the Sixties*, prose and notes translated by David Jacobson; poetry translated by Luigi Ballerini, Bradley Dick, Michael Moore, Stephen Sartarelli, and Paul Vangelisti. Unless otherwise stated, the translations of poems are from this edition.

the daily word into poetical word. According to the Modernist writer and “priest of the eternal imagination” Stephen Daedalus, “in the virgin womb of the imagination the word was made flesh”. For the Surrealist Breton, “imagination” was a pristine parallel reality too, a *surreality*. Breton’s ‘womb’ was the subconscious, the reservoir of pure imagination, a dimension autonomous and free from the ideological burden of the everyday, from the moral constraints of the logical thinking of the rational civilized world: “we must give thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud [if t]he imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights [...] I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*”.⁴²⁰

Sanguineti’s use of the montage marks the crisis of the modernist firm belief and almost religious faith in the superhuman capacity of the artist’s subconscious to radically re-work, *alchemically transmute*, everyday language. According to Éanna Ó Ceallacháin, Sanguineti’s “assertions of a kind of debasement of the poetic persona [of the later years ...] can be traced back in various ways to the deeply problematic status of the *io* in his earlier work – a feature which must also be seen in the context of a broader tendency in the *neoavan-guardia* towards the ‘riduzione dell’io’”.⁴²¹ Put otherwise, the debasement of the poetic persona (“voyeur” and “erotomane” vs creator) is to be related to problems of language and subjectivity and to the apparent impossibility to conceive of the subconscious as a pristine pre-ideological entity and as the powerful source of a totally original creation. This is clearly stated by Sanguineti in “Per un’avanguardia rivoluzionaria”: “[...] le traitement onirique [...] est tout entier immergé dans une situation historique”⁴²². The subconscious too exists thanks to a negative and yet essentially constitutive relationship with

⁴²⁰ A. Breton, ‘Manifeste du Surrealisme’ (1924), *Manifestos of Surrealism*, p. 10-4. For the translation into Italian see Mario De Micheli, *Le avanguardie artistiche del Novecento*, pp. 322-26.

⁴²¹ É. Ó. Ceallacháin, ‘Sanguineti and Montale: travelling companions in the 1970s’, p. 101.

⁴²² E. Sanguineti, ‘Pour une avant-garde révolutionnaire’, p. 81.

socio-economic reality: the artist's subconscious already is a deeply 'colonized' reality;⁴²³ to contrive a 'metaphysical' poetic operation giving the illusion of an elsewhere, a lyrical escape from civilization is yet a further linguistic mystification of reality. The task of the poet is to 'create': "intellectualis seminis seu spermatis punctum / ut duo unum fiant character amoris" (*Laborintus*, sec. 15), but "lo spettro maschile con voce telefonica" ("the masculine specter with telephone voice", *Laborintus*, sec. 2) only produces a 'risible' "orinazione dell'encefalo" ("encephalon's urination", *ibid.*), a sort of a nocturnal emission, a 'miscreation' – "sed non omnis emissio dice", and then after 11 lines, "est proprie pollutio" (*ibid.*).

A reading of a section from the twenty-seven-section poem *Laborintus* may exemplify the operation of the montage as the formal manifestation of a critical understanding of the impossibility of the subject's creativity: "et j'y mis du raisonnement e non basta et du pathétique e non basta / ancora και τα των ποιητων and CAPITAL LETTERS" ("et j'y mis du raisonnement and it's not enough et du pathétique and it's not enough again και τα των ποιητων and CAPITAL LETTERS", sec. 23). The oneiric descent into the subconscious of an alienated and dismembered subjectivity is enacted on the level of language by means of the subversion of syntactic hierarchy, miscellany of styles, mixture of different languages (Greek, Latin, French, English), sclerotic proliferation of punctuation and systematic structural subversion of the grammar rules organizing language. The following is the whole of section 11:

la nostra esperienza tollera tutte le guerre
tollera la peste mansueta delle discipline
la tua statura mescola pietre sirene pollici bruchi

⁴²³ For Sanguineti's treatment of the subconscious and its relationship with Surrealism, cf. M. Manganelli 'Motivi surrealisti nella scrittura di Sanguineti'.

oh fermo carcere
 dei disegni e dell'utero tempo indicativo fontana che rode e silenzio
 e propriamente et os clausit digito
 distratto Laszo pietosamente
 per amori per mezzo delle ossa amati
 per mezzo della calce viva
 per mezzo dei concerti per violino e orchestra
 per mezzo delle tue lenzuola
 per mezzo della Kritik der reinen Vernunft
 amori da ogni cornice
 e da ogni tradimento protestati
 amori del tutto principali
 amori ecco essenziali promossi da ogni fiore
 ergo vacuas fac sedes
 tuarum aurium devi assumere le pietre disperate oh tridente
 delle mie fatiche chimiche ancora e sempre Ellie
 mio folto estuario coltivatrice di cicatrici inchiodate
 chiedere la notizia delle tue monete infiammabili dei tuoi vuoti porticati
 per uno regolamento
 stabilirete il suo gusto
 esigere il fallimento dietro la tua età
 i fiammiferi con secchezza sotto i tuoi consigli sottrarre

our wisdom tolerates all wars / tolerates the mild plague of disciplines / your stature
 mixes stones sirens thumbs worms / oh steady prison / of drawings and of the womb
 indicative tense fountain that gnaws and silence / and truly et os clausit digito /
 distracted Laszo piteously / for loves loved by means of bones / by means of quicklime
 / by means of concertos for violin and orchestra / by means of your sheets / by means of
 the Kritik der reinen Vernunft / loves protested by each / frame and each betrayal /
 loves absolutely foremost / then essential loves promoted by each flower / ergo vacuas
 fac sedes / tuarum aurium you have to assume the wretched stones oh trident / of my
 chemical labors now and forever Ellie / my lush estuary cultivator of nailed scars / ask

about the news of your inflammable coins of your empty arcades / for a rule / you will
 establish its taste / demand failure behind your age / dryly extract the matches from
 under your rabbits

The contiguity of different languages and the quotations from more or less obscure sources enact a chaos of sounds partially detached from the signifying process, with the caveat that alchemical symbolism and Jungian archetypes counteract the anti-communicativeness of the syntax by providing the word with a symbolic and mythological 'narrative' context.⁴²⁴ And yet, the latter seems to be confined to the subconscious dimension where the word never manages to achieve the ideological clarity, connotative stability and functionality provided by objectifying socio-ideological processes and relationships. The obscurity of the poem is partially deciphered by the critical apparatus provided by Alfredo Giuliani's footnotes to *I novissimi* in a move that, especially in Sanguineti's case (with its strong mythological framework) finds its antecedent in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The Ellie-Palus is the reference point of the descent into the nether world, the chaos of the historical soul Ellie-Palus-womb that, variously defined as "steady prison", "womb", "indicative tense" "fountain that gnaws" and "silence", in Giuliani's words "raw material that "mixes" all realities in itself [...] In this dream prediction of Ellie, language disintegrates and miscarries".⁴²⁵ Ellie is the female, bodily, corporeal aspect of both reality and of the poet's perception of himself: "riposta tenue Ellie e tu mio corpo tu infatti tenue Ellie eri il mio corpo / immaginoso quasi conclusione de una estatica dialettica spirituale" ("hidden soft Ellie and you my body you in fact soft Ellie were my / fanciful body almost a conclusion of ecstatic spiritual dialectics",

⁴²⁴ "[...] l'œuvre de Jung m'intéressait comme répertoire de symboles, comme une sorte de vocabulaire symbolique qui pouvait être employé à la façon d'une mythologie, qui était immédiatement applicable au niveau de la poésie. En somme, cela donnait la possibilité de se servir d'un dictionnaire d'images, garanti par une certaine 'objectivité'." E. Sanguineti, 'Pour une avant-garde révolutionnaire', p. 78.

⁴²⁵ Giuliani's footnote to section 11, *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 203; "materia prima che "mescola" in sé ogni realtà [...] In questa predica onirica di Ellie il linguaggio si disgrega e abortisce", *I novissimi*, p. 71.

sec. 1).

The technical motivations for the use of the montage as a deeply anti-logocentric “mélange de comique ah sono avvilito adesso et de pathétique” (“ce mélange de comique ah I’m disheartened now et de pathétique”, sec. 23) are to be found also in Sanguineti’s dialogic disposition towards other artistic media, a disposition that was symptomatic of the poet’s attempt to re-establish a connection with the historical avant-garde’s legacy that had been left unexplored by Neo-realism and post-crepuscularism – his collaboration as a librettist with Berio, *Paesaggio* (1961), *Laborintus II* (1963-65), *A-Ronne* (1974)⁴²⁶ and his interest for Enrico Baj’s *art informel*. Sanguineti’s use of the montage stems from the elaboration of a close dialogue with contemporary, more advanced and innovative activities in the musical and pictorial field, collaboration “based on the awareness that there existed a backwardness in the Italian literary scene vis-à-vis the pictorial and musical scene.”⁴²⁷ According to Sanguineti, “on a literary level the situation had remained much more closed [...] It was much easier for me to discuss poetic issues with a painter or musician than with a man of letters of a previous generation, and, in most cases, even of my own generation.”⁴²⁸ In the essay “‘Action’ Poetry? (Poesia infomale?)” – published as part of the theoretical appendix to the anthology *I novissimi* – Sanguineti explains his resort to action painting and abstract expressionism but also to serial and post-dodecaphonic music as follows:

[a] crisis of language, such as I perceived myself to be defining and enacting in my verses, found comfort and analogy in related pictorial (and musical) experiments much more than in literary experiments: the private reference [...] to certain technico-expressive situations in other arts (music no less than painting) and notably to the

⁴²⁶ See R. Favaro *Sound, Music, Writing: The Soundtrack of 20th Century Italian Literature*, section on Sanguineti.

⁴²⁷ L. Pestalozza, “Critica spettacolare della spettacolarità. Conversazione con Edoardo Sanguineti”, p. 23. Quoting from R. Favaro, *Sound, Music, Writing: The Soundtrack of 20th Century Italian Literature*, p. 156.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*

situation of abstract expressionism [...] was a way of breaking, in solitude, the very solitude of the poetics in which I found myself virtually cast.⁴²⁹

Sanguineti's new poetics drew from the tradition of the avant-garde's 'intersemiotic translation': *informal poetry* was thus an attempt to translate the technique of *l'art informel* into a linguistic code.⁴³⁰ In *Laborintus* and *Erotopaegnia* still, the systematic fragmentation of the verbal continuum is the result of the elaboration of poetic verbal messages based on musical *serialism* and an-iconic messages. The total rejection of Art's functionality and communicativeness allows for neither catharsis nor redemption to the "sophisticated" reader of this Dantean journey into the chaotic mass of linguistic debris and nonsense that is contemporary life. Niva Lorenzini suggests that the

structural subversion [...] is realized by the overlapping of layers of discourse, shifting of voices, polyphonic synchrony of interventions, in such a way that the impossibility to communicate, the alienation from a social context, is enacted by means of noise, interference, disturbance, interruption; silence ends up by being the equivalent of the 'everything said', vocal noise, sound dispersion or the monotonous, shrewish obsession of the unrelated reverting word.⁴³¹

The poetic word is reduced to its pure sound dimension. Roman Jakobson has pointed out that "[i]n poetic language, in which the sign as such takes on an autonomous value, [...] sound symbolism becomes an actual factor and creates a sort of accompaniment to the signified".⁴³² And yet, in *Laborintus*, that harmonious relationship between sound and

⁴²⁹ E. Sanguineti, 'Action Poetry?', in *I Novissimi* [Eng.] p. 388; "Una crisi di linguaggio, quale io intendevo stabilire e patire nei versi, trovava conforto e analogia in affini asperimenti pittorici (e musicali), assai più che in esperimenti di ordine letterario: il privato richiamo [...] a talune situazioni tecnico-espressive di altre arti (della musica, intendo dire, non meno che della pittura), e segnatamente alla situazione rappresentata dall'espressionismo astratto [...] era un modo di rompere, in solitudine, la solitudine stessa di poetica in cui mi trovavo praticamente gettato, 'Poesia informale?', in *I novissimi*, p. 169.

⁴³⁰ Cf. F. Curi *La poesia italiana d'avanguardia*, pp. 155-6.

⁴³¹ "L'eversione strutturale si precisa perciò [...] come sovrapposizione di piani di discorso, sfasatura di voci, polifonica sincronia d'interventi, in modo che l'impossibilità di comunicare, l'alienazione appunto da un contesto sociale, si attuano attraverso il rumore, l'interferenza, il disturbo, l'interruzione, e il silenzio finisce per coincidere con il 'tutto detto', con il frastuono vocale, con la dispersione sonora o con la monotona, assillante ossessione della parola ritornante e irrelata". N. Lorenzini, *Il laboratorio della poesia*, p. 18. My translation.

⁴³² R. Jakobson, *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning*, p. 113.

signified is completely thrown out of balance: the abolition of syntactic order decontextualizes the word by inhibiting the development of the signifying process. The signified meant, within a Lacanian perspective, as the mental concept that is created by the way in which language operates,⁴³³ is almost nullified by the systematic sabotage of linguistic workings. The sound dimension of the word acquires a supreme importance while undermining from within *logos* meant as a rational consequential event. The 'serial' construction characterizing sections 13 and 14, "piangere la pietra e la pietra e la pietra / la pietra ininterrotamente con il ghetto delle immaginazioni" ("to weep the stone and the stone and the stone / the stone with no interruption / with the ghetto of the imaginations", sec.14)⁴³⁴ acts as a hindrance to the flow of verbal debris. The obsessive repetition of words neutralizes the intensity of the poetic word:

desiderantur (essi)
analizzatori e analizzatrici desiderantur (essi) personaggi anche
ed erotici e sofisticati
desiderantur desiderantur

desiderantur (they) / analyzers and analyzeresses desiderantur (they) characters too /
and erotic and sophisticated / desiderantur desiderantur (*Laborintus*, sec. I)

The echolalia enacts the existential and historical impasse by parodying the ideological dimension of the word and reducing it to mere sound: "ma complicazione come alienazione come aspra alienazione corollario / alienazione epigrammatico epilogo" ("but complication like alienation like bitter alienation corollary / epigrammatic alienation dramatic epilogue", sec. 15).

The ambiguity resulting from the "philological *collage*"⁴³⁵ is felt also by the researcher who is confronted with the choice of either adopting a philological approach by

⁴³³ J. Lacan, 'Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious', p. 190.

⁴³⁴ Sections 14 is not anthologized in *I novissimi*. I am quitong from E. Sanguineti, *Catamerone*. My translation.

⁴³⁵ E. Sanguineti, 'Action Poetry?', in *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 387; "collage filologico", 'Poesia informale?', *I novissimi*, p. 168.

identifying the sources of the quotations⁴³⁶ or focusing instead on the formal nature of the operation. *Plurilinguism* – the apparently random juxtaposition of medieval Latin, Italian, foreign and sectorial languages – gives an instance of the historical and social determinations of language as a medium by pointing to the conventionality of its relationship with reality. The sovraposition of languages, the violent and unjustified interruption of the syntax, the cutting of the sentence by means of a montage-like technique, violently disrupts the arbitrariness and *falsity* of the linguistic order. The anti-naturalist and anti-mimetic treatment of the *real* denounces the ideological nature of language: the violent treatment of the verbal material wants to show us that language as a way of interpreting the real already is ideology.

In Sanguineti's own words:

Ces langages sont finalement analysables sur le plan sociologique et politique. Alors: parler d'un filtre, signifie avoir conscience que *le langage ne peut me donner la réalité dans son immédiateté, et comme dans sa neutralité*, ce qui est justement l'aspiration de Guglielmi, *mais qu'il crée artificiellement un certain produit conventionnel, culturel, historique, qui me renvoie à la réalité, mais qui dans le même temps forme un certain organisme caractérisé idéologiquement par sa propre structure.*⁴³⁷

The poetic word is liberated from both the communicative function of language and the intimist subjectivity of *crepuscular* poetry. The indeterminacy of the textual segments and the continual interruption of the signifying process make the concretization of the verbal material into mental images almost impossible. The "mental landscape" fostered by Laborintus is one close to the non-formal, aniconic stance expressed by abstract painting, action painting and *art informel*: "In action painting the gesture and resulting brushstroke express themselves rather than any extraneous meaning; the process of painting represents the content of the

⁴³⁶ Cf. E. Baccarani, *La poesia nel labirinto. Razionalismo e istanza "antiletteraria" nell'opera e nella cultura di Edoardo Sanguineti*.

⁴³⁷ E. Sanguineti, 'Pour une avant-garde révolutionnaire', pp 84-5.

picture.”⁴³⁸ Sanguineti has acknowledged the influence of Enrico Baj, one of the exponents of l’art informel in Italy and founding member, with Sergio Dangelo, of the Milan based “Movimento Arte Nucleare”. On the other hand, Niva Lorenzini has already pointed out how some verses in *Laborintus* present similarities with certain paintings by Jackson Pollock. In the hypnotic and delirious structure of those verses, the repeated and unrelated word never manages to attain the final resolution granted by the signification process just like some frenzied recurring yet unresolved objects in Pollock’s ‘drip paintings’.⁴³⁹ One could go even further with those similarities: we find archetypal symbols from the psycho-analysis of C. G. Jung also in Pollock (who was under psycho-analytical treatment for alcohol problems) and for both Pollock and Sanguineti, mythology is equated, in a Surrealist fashion, with the unconscious. And yet, the degree of self-awareness and ideological understanding of the artistic medium they use set the two dramatically apart.

In Pollock’s paintings chance and principle converge: “[...] the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. [...] there is pure harmony, an easy give and take.”⁴⁴⁰ The harmonic flow of energy into artistic forms is not hindered by the ideological awareness of painting as a highly self-referential ‘formalistic’ artistic medium. For Pollock, the artist is a self-less medium transforming the energy of the creative ‘flow’ into artistic form. His principle of “dripping” – canvas stretched on the floor, the paint dripping onto it from the brush or straight out of the tin can – epitomizes the firm belief in chance as a “*vital and positive principle of energetic transformation*”.⁴⁴¹ ‘Vitality’ here becomes a key principle: the formal chaos expressed by the painting is but an instance of the fundamental harmony

⁴³⁸ K. Ruhrberg, *Painting, ‘Art of the 20th Century*, Vol. 1, p. 273.

⁴³⁹ Cf. N. Lorenzini, *Il laboratorio della poesia*, p. 27.

⁴⁴⁰ Quoted from K. Ruhrberg, *Art of the 20th Century*, p. 270.

⁴⁴¹ “*principio vitale e positivo di trasformazione energetica*”, author’s italics. M. Calvesi, *Avanguardia di massa*, p. 51. My translation.

sustaining all life. Painting as a medium draws from, catalyzes and transforms that energy. To create is to transform: art is meant as mutation and regeneration. Such poetics is also shared by the Futurists, Dadaists, Surrealists and Marcel Duchamp. According to Maurizio Calvesi “This poetics, that in ancient times used to be based on the operative mental and symbolic premises of alchemy, is now supported and confirmed by science: physics, chemistry ...”.⁴⁴² The *parole in libertà* expresses the Futurist’s artist’s longing to be part of the communicative flow by means of a supernatural merging with technology and science. Scientific knowledge is transformed into pure subversive energy. Also the new art theorized by Baj in the “Manifesto della pittura nucleare” (Bruxelles, 1952) draws its vitality from the scientific discoveries in modern physics, atom scission and space exploration, the ‘technological frenzy’ of the 50s and 60s. For Baj, it is the outburst of vital energy coming from a sort of ‘nuclear humanity’ that will change the world forever. The inscription in one of Baj’s paintings (‘The Bum Manifesto’, 1952) reads: “le teste degli uomini sono cariche di esplosivi ogni atomo sta per scoppiare i ciechi cioè i non nucleari ignorano tale situazione”.⁴⁴³ Or again: “le forze sono cariche elettriche tutto = carica elettrica”⁴⁴⁴. Baj’s enthusiasm for science will gradually give way to a strong anti-militarist stance caused by the awareness of the political misuses of scientific progress.

On a thematic level, Sanguineti’s *Laborintus* confirms the close relationship between art, alchemy and science. The disintegration of the subjectivity and the ensuing reconnection with the Jungian collective soul, is achieved through the atomization of the *narrating I*’s personality: “e una volta Mare Humorum guardami bene (la rottura di una personalità) / [...]

⁴⁴² “Questa poetica, che in antico poggiava sulle premesse mentali e simboliche, se non operative, dell’alchimia, ora cerca e trova conferme, supporti nella scienza: nella fisica come nella chimica [...]” M. Calvesi, *Avanguardia di massa*, p. 50. My translation.

⁴⁴³ “The heads of men are full of explosive every atom is about to explode the blind i.e. the non-nuclears ignore this situation”, E. Baj, ‘The Bum Manifesto’.

⁴⁴⁴ “the forces are electric charges all = electric charge”, *ibid.*

è finita infine è atomizzata e io sono io sono una moltitudine” (“and just once, Mare Humorum, look at me (the fracture of a personality) / [...] it’s over at last it is atomized and I am I am a multitude”, sec. 2) The descent into the subconscious is the oneiric paranoid experience of a ‘cold war’ nuclear disaster “simbolizzato in cifre / terribilmente armoniose” (“symbolized in ciphers / terribly harmonious”, *ibid.*). The poem itself as a linguistic creation is “l’ustione linguistica frammenti” (“the linguistic burn fragments”) dreamt “di fronte all’eruzione di carbonizzanti passioni / infatti e alle distorsioni relative di fronte a lunghi funghi fumosi” (“before the eruption of carbonizing passion / and relative distortions in front of long, smoky mushrooms” (*ibid.*). The representation of the personality’s fragmentation and “nervous breakdown” is achieved through the grammatical and semantic disintegration of the linguistic continuum. The subject’s dimension is reduced to its semantic responsibility towards language. The linguistic regression to the subconscious is not an end in itself but the precursor of “un stadio enunciatamente ricostruttivo di responsabile ricomposizione” (“an enunciatively reconstructive phase of responsible recomposition”, sec. 2).

The “Palus Putredinis”, literally translated as *swamp of putrefaction*, contains all the potentialities of the primordial stage of life. The possibility for their transformation into a higher stage is suggested by the alchemical reference to the “phlogiston”, “tu e tu mio spazioso corpo / di flogisto che ti alzi e ti materializzi nell’idea del nuoto” (“you and you my spacious body / of phlogiston that rises and materializes in the idea of swimming”, sec. 1). But the “aria inquinata” (“polluted air, sec. 1) offers no possibility for the transmutation of the larvae-state humanity suggested by the alchemical homunculi, “i nani extratemporali” (“extratemporal dwarfs”, sec. 1). We find no enthusiasm whatsoever for the alluring promises of science: the atomization of subjectivity and the ensuing merging with the collective subconscious are followed by the awakening as a moment of “involution”: “ah il mio sonno;

e ah? e involuzione? e ah e oh? devoluzione? (e uh?) / e volizione!” (“ah my slumber; and ah? and involution? And ah and oh? Devolution (and uh?) / and volition!”, sec. 26). The moment of potential growth is confined to the subconscious: the latter is convincingly explored linguistically and yet it bears no utopian promises of social subversion and liberation – as it is the case in Surrealism – that may go beyond its linguistic re-enactment. Which brings us back to the problem of language.

On a structural level, the disintegration of grammar and of syntax leads to the fragmentation of language as a medium, brings on awareness of the falsity of its transparency and puts a check on its communicative function. Language meant as social practice and shared ‘value’ readily and directly assuring the intersubjective flow of the different individual experiences making up a community is here recklessly annihilated by the self-referentiality of the poetic operation. The latter crystallizes the moment of signification either into a single repeated word or into segments of quotations that sometimes have to be ‘reconnected’ through a vertical reading. The operation is at once a form of ideological and formal criticism towards the deceptively harmonious, homogeneous and ‘monologically’ standardized flow of social communication. The reasons for such an operation are confirmed by Alfredo Giuliani in the introduction to *I Novissimi*: “If there is no conciliation with society, and not even peaceful coexistence with the ideologies of reality, poetry must be put to the rigors of anarchy”⁴⁴⁵ because “[s]ince all language tends today to become a commodity one cannot take for granted a single word or grammatical form or syntagm”.⁴⁴⁶ Poetry has to carry out a systematic revolt against the emptiness of standardized language: to be part of the flow of communication, is to be part of the flow of the commodities. The Surrealists’ utopianism is

⁴⁴⁵ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to the second edition of *I Novissimi* [Eng], p. 45.

⁴⁴⁶ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng], p. 23; [p]oiché tutta la lingua tende oggi a divenire una merce, non si può prendere per dati né una parola né una forma grammaticale né un solo sintagma”, ‘Introduzione’ a *I novissimi*, p. xvi.

lost in Sanguineti's despairing linguistic operation. However, there is an underlying very strong similarity: Sanguineti does to language what the Surrealists did to industrially produced objects; he alienates language as a mass produced commodity from its supposed 'user', the disoriented reader. The operation language endures in *Laborintus*, its reduction to grotesque *unusable* units, resembles the Surrealists' deformation of mass produced objects: one has only to think of Salvador Dali's clocks in 'The Persistence of Memory', or 'Mae West's Face which May Be used as a Surrealist Apartment.'⁴⁴⁷ Also the assemblage of newspaper headlines suggested by Breton as a way of producing a poem – according to a *modus operandi* extremely similar to Tzara's – is supposed to create the same effect: to alienate the bourgeois reader from the language he or she reads everyday.⁴⁴⁸ What seems to differentiate Sanguineti's use of the fragment from Breton's (or Tzara's) is the context of origin of the fragments: old church-Latin books, mythology, alchemy etc. Also, one cannot talk of a pastiche-like repetition here. To the contrary: the operation is perceived as motivated by a precise "historical necessity", the phenomenon of the 'italiano televisivo' the tv, standard Italian spreading in the 60s, the kind of leveling rhetoric Alfredo Giuliani dubs as "tv esperanto" in his introduction to *I novissimi*.

VI. Nanni Balestrini

The anti-communicative stance of the neo-avant-garde reaches its apex with Sanguineti and Nanni Balestrini, and yet it is a trait that, to a lesser or greater extent, is common to the whole group of the Novissimi. Maria Corti concisely sums up their anti-communicative poetical praxis as follows:

- 1) the poetic message only arises from rejection of the code, hence the possibility of a

⁴⁴⁷ Cf. E. Sanguineti, 'Il surrealismo ha inventato il Kitch', *Ideologia e linguaggio*, *passim*.

⁴⁴⁸ See the last section of this chapter.

preliminary anti-communicative phase. – 2) the code is rejected because of the rejection of its referential function, which is not ideologically reliable, that is, the meanings language conveys. – 3) The poetico-linguistic operation becomes itself the meaning. – 4) These signifiers – bearers of meaning – are not to be confused with the psychoanalytic notion of the signifier. – 5) From the point of view of the structures every text is open”⁴⁴⁹.

From a semiotic perspective, the Novissimi’s invention of a new code gives rise to the antinomic structure of the literary field of those years, the dichotomization of two opposing poles: on the one hand, the neoavanguardia’s focus on formal experimentation and, on the other, a far vaster traditional literary production, “a ruinous mass of entertainment novels”⁴⁵⁰ fuelled by the boom of the publishing industry and “tending [...] to extend the area of recipients towards the direction of the new mass culture”.⁴⁵¹

In the poems of Nanni Balestrini the word is reduced to its “degree zero”. Balestrini’s treatment of the verbal material has been likened to the *papiers collés* or the collages of Kurt Schwitters – who associated with some members of Berlin Dada. With Balestrini, the poetic operation itself becomes a way of giving literary status to the vast reservoir of linguistic material ‘already there’. Verbal material not written by the poet but taken instead from the ‘tank waste’ of popular, ‘low’ culture; ‘valueless’ discarded linguistic fragments pre-existing the poetic operation, taken from the ‘common places’ of spoken communication, advertising and media information, become ‘art’ by means of the arbitrary gesture of the poet. Balestrini’s *gesture*, one working by means of “cut” and “combination”, is deeply physical

⁴⁴⁹ “1) il messaggio poetico nasce solo attraverso il rifiuto del codice, donde la previsione di una preliminare eventuale fase anticomunicativa. – 2) Si rifiuta il codice perché si rifiuta la referenza che gli è sottesa, non più ideologicamente attendibile, cioè i significati che la lingua veicola. – 3) L’operazione poetico-linguistica si fa essa stessa significato, donde un neocontenutismo, secondo la formula di Giuliani. – 4) Questi nuovi significanti portatori di significato non vanno confusi con la nozione psicanalitica del significante. – 5) Dal punto di vista delle strutture, ogni testo è aperto”. M. Corti *Il viaggio testuale*, p. 117. My translation.

⁴⁵⁰ “un affollamento rovinoso di romanzi di consumo”, *ibid.*, p. 115. My translation.

⁴⁵¹ “tendente [...] ad estendere l’area dei destinatari in direzione della nuova cultura di massa”, *ibid.*, p. 116. My translation.

and treats language with the same material intensity as the visual artist does. In this it bears the strong influence of Piero Manzoni (with whom Balestrini collaborated for the review “Azimuth” in 1958-9)⁴⁵² and also of Lucio Fontana, especially Fontana’s *Concetti spaziali* (*Spatial Concepts*). Here the ‘cut’ activates not only the surface of the canvas plane, but also the space behind and in front of it. Fontana’s *minimalistic tridimensionality* goes beyond the understanding of space as elaborated and represented by both the Renaissance and the modern artist. His ‘cuts’ and ‘holes’ do not represent space on the canvas, they physically open up the canvas in order to introduce real space into it.

Balestrini’s poetry is multi-dimensional, multi-temporal, multi-layered: the poetical fragment becomes an unrelated linguistic entity, a shaky, contingent structure “a confused and still fermenting expression, bearing the signs of its detachment from the mental stage, signs of not quite achieved fusion with the verbal state.”⁴⁵³ The signification process is methodically arrested, suspended by the poet’s “contrary action”, one thriving on the *systematically inconsistent* treatment of the verbal material. The celebration of an irreducible linguistic heterogeneity is carried out at the expenses of the signification process as more or less sadistically acknowledged by Balestrini himself. The de-structuring anti-hierarchical organization of the verbal material does not allow for the prominence – either on the level of signification or on that of structure – of the single poetical word (over others). The provokingly parithetic relationship among words enacts a chaos and ‘verbal anarchy’ instituting verbal structures that are always contingent, and unrepeatable and have to be analyzed materially, singularly, case by case.

⁴⁵² Both Sanguineti and Balestrini published in the review *Azimuth* together with artists like Klein, Pomodoro, Raushenberg, Jasper Johns, Piero Dorazio, Novelli and Angeli.

⁴⁵³ N. Balestrini, ‘Language and Opposition’, in *I Novissimi* [Eng], p. 382; “espressione confusa e ribollente ancora, che porta su di sé i segni del distacco dallo stato mentale, della fusione con completamente avvenuta”, ‘Linguaggio e opposizione’, in *I novissimi*, p. 163.

In the 'Apologo dell'evaso' ('Apologue of the fugitive') – the poem opening Balestrini's contribution to *I novissimi* – the fragmented anarchic multidimensionality is recorded on the temporal level too with the use of four different tenses in the space of only 4 tercets: *passato remoto*: "videro" ("saw"); *imperfetto*: "galleggiavano" ("floated"); present tense: "si fa" ("becomes"); future tense: "saremo" ("will we be"). The tenses are mainly concentrated in the third tercet where the temporal chaos they enact proclaims the uselessness of the cataloguing function of the "historian": "Fra I pampini ovunque liberi / galleggiavano, gonfi – e si fa vano / l'ufficio dello storico. Ma saremo // a lungo preservati [...]?" ("Amid the vine leaves everywhere / they floated free, bloated – and the historian's / task becomes pointless. But will we be // protected ...?"). Action, movement and violence recorded this time in the present tense (the journalistic tense *par excellence*) answer the question: "Lucenti strani corpi / violano il cielo; sbanda / il filo di formiche diagonale // [...] e un argine / ultimo crolla [...]" ("Strange, shining bodies / violate the sky; the diagonal / column of ants breaks up // [...] and one last / embankment collapse"). Anarchic violence as a linguistic operation appears to be unmotivated on a thematic level – it is not clear who the subject of the enunciation is. And yet there are a few regurgitated words and commonplaces providing a clue to explain a conflict that is at once verbal and social: the "vizi dei governanti" ("vices of our leaders"), the "finanzieri corrotti" ("corrupt coastguards"), "la piccola borghesia" ("the petty bourgeoisie") and the "contrabbandieri" ("smugglers"). The decisive clue seems to be given by the vertical reading of interpolated fragments coming from Cecco Angiolieri's "S'io fossi foco" ("If I were fire"): "[...] Lode / a un'estate di foco. S'io fossi // la piccola borghesia colata / nelle piazze fiorite e nei dì di festa" and then, after a tercet, "[...] chi fuggirei? [...]" ([...] "Praise / for a summer of fire. If I were // the petty bourgeoisie pouring / into flowered streets and holidays [...] who would I / run from? [...]").

Claudio Brancaleoni has strongly stressed that there is a consistent number of quotations from erudite sources in the poems of the early Balestrini although critics – Angelo Guglielmi *in primis* – have usually given more relevance to the use of fragments from everyday language.⁴⁵⁴ The mixing of styles, words and sentences coming from different contexts is the trait characterizing Balestrini's use of the collage technique. These fragments, extrapolated from both 'high' literary sources and 'low' everyday popular culture, share the condition of being verbal *objets trouvés* made by somebody else and pre-existing the poet's operation. 'De Cultu Virginis' provides another example of the mixing of material from 'high' and 'low' sources: the title 'De Cultu Virginis' is derived from Tertullian and another cultural reference is made to Giordano Bruno through a *pun* on the sonnet "Al Mal Contento" ("To the Malcontent") opening Bruno's *Cena delle Ceneri*. The first four verses of the poem, semantically bind up these erudite references with the linguistic concision of everyday information: "To the Malcontent" becomes the "*Malcontento Bar*" ("*Malcontent Bar*"), the scene of a murder summarized and simplified by two verses with a concision that, in terms of the situation of utterance, makes them belong to the discursive area of newspaper headlines:

prima di posare sul sagrato si libera ad ali tese
 negli specchi di luce bagnata, rotti da un piede verde;
 al *Malcontento Bar* ferisce mortalmente uno sconosciuto
 scambiandolo per il suo seduttore.

Before stopping in the churchyard she hovers on outstretched wings / in mirrors of wet light, broken by a green foot; / at the *Malcontent Bar* she mortally wounds a stranger, / mistaking him for her seducer. ('De cultu virginis')

At the moment of selection of the fragments of the verbal material, the montage expresses an

⁴⁵⁴ C. Brancaleoni, 'Gli esordi della neoavanguardia. La poetica "novissima" di Nanni Balestrini'. Brancaleoni is here referring to A. Guglielmi, 'Le tecniche di Balestrini', *Vero e falso*, pp. 138-9.

anti-literary stance in the sense that by selecting both 'high' and 'low' sources, it establishes their equality on a qualitative level. The erudite quotation is put on the same level as the 'raw' pieces of everyday communication as if the white page were a *tabula rasa*, the degree zero of all socio-linguistic values.⁴⁵⁵ This has an effect on the workings of the montage as a poetical assemblage of heterogeneous fragments: the montage makes the literary-poetical word 'fail' to operate according to its normal poetical status. Gaston Bachelard called this 'correct' functioning the "*retentissement*" of the poetical word, meaning the poetical image produced by the sound of the word.⁴⁵⁶ One could say that this image is the product of the child-like and trusting fascination the reader may feel for *just one word*, its sound, its rhythm. Within Bachelard's philosophical premises, the image aroused by the word is the word's truest ontological meaning. And yet, Balestrini's poems (where the word is stripped of its ontological status and is used in a particular, contingent way) fail to re-enact the workings described by Bachelard. The contiguity of fragments originally belonging to the literary tradition on the one hand and, on the other, of fragments from everyday language, is a gesture of 'metapoetry' carrying out a 'lowering' (*abbassamento*) of the status of the poetical word, *abbassamento* meant as 'de-lyricalization', that is, as critical of the lyrical, intimist attitude of the poetical I. Crucially, the latter operates on the level of prosody too: Balestrini's 'versification' is deliberately deprived of virtuoso characteristics like alliteration, assonance and repetitions. His poetry seems to exceed (if not radicalize) even the reduction to the degree zero 'programmed' by Roland Barthes:

il s'agit d'anéantir une intention de rapports pour lui substituer une explosion de mots. La poésie moderne [...] détruit la nature spontanément fonctionnelle du langage et n'en laisse subsister que les assises lexicales. Elle ne garde des rapports que leur

⁴⁵⁵ Cf. C. Gubbiotti, 'Travestitismo d'avanguardia'.

⁴⁵⁶ G. Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace*, p. 2.

mouvement, leur musique, non leur vérité. Le Mot éclate au-dessus d'une ligne de rapports évidés, la grammaire est dépourvue de sa finalité, elle devient prosodie, elle n'est plus qu'une inflexion qui dure pour présenter le Mot. Les rapports ne sont pas à proprement parler supprimés, ils sont simplement des places gardées, ils sont une parodie de rapports et ce néant est nécessaire car il faut que la densité du Mot s'élève hors d'un enchantement vide, comme un bruit et un signe sans fond, comme une fureur et un mystère.⁴⁵⁷

Within the terms of Balestrini's poetic operation, fragmented language is mechanically re-assembled to create new devices, the aim of which is to self-generate meaning: the functioning of the poetical fragment does not rely on the sound-dimension. To put it in Barthes terms, the way Balestrini makes use of the montage nullifies not only the "truth" of the word, but also its "musicality". The poem 'De Magnalibus Urbis M' could serve as an example:

nell'aria nebbiosa di un mattino sgozzate
 dopo 6 ore di agonia non ti guardano in faccia
 o forse sarà un legno o frasca o altra ombria
 dietro i tergicristalli in agguato: non sanno nemmeno
 chi sei (ecco quella del duca Melzi guarda
 sigilli del) le pupille a un ideale lontano

semaforo [...]

(in the foggy air of a morning their throat slit / after 6 hours of death-agony they don't look you in the face / or perhaps it's a stick or frond or other shade / behind the windshield wipers lying in wait: they don't even know / who you are (here's Duke Melzi's dame, keeper of the seal of) the pupils to a remote ideal // traffic-light [...])

The systematic fragmentation of the verbal material, the "cutting and combination" affects the rhythm that becomes a sort of hiccupping prosody. The fragment "or perhaps it's a stick

⁴⁵⁷ R. Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, pp. 36-37.

or frond or other shade” is by Ugo Foscolo and concerns him in Milan. The title of the poem is after a work on the city of Milan by Bonvesin de la Riva, ‘De Magnalibus Urbis Mediolani’; “their throats slit / after 6 hours of death agony” refers to the ‘Colonna infame’ erected in Milan in 1630. Some quotations from the *Corriere della Sera* describing the snowfall in Milan in 1895 also alternates in the poem.⁴⁵⁸ The quotations mix up different styles and times but they all carry out the function of a ‘place deixis’. The sources of the literary quotations have the effect of stabilizing the entropy enacted by the infinite potentialities of the semantic units. In other words, they favour one possible interpretation over others – *this is a poem about Milan*. There are other fragments the reader has to re-assemble as if they were the wheels of a very complicated mechanism: “Dionisa Cisqua La Pavana La Chessa”, all names of famous nineteenth century Milanese prostitutes and usurers; the fragment from the newspaper article on the snowfall which reads “così da rendere insufficiente l’opera di spazzatura” (“so as to render the work of snow-sweeping insufficient”). In the latter, the word “spazzatura” decontextualized as it is, may also have the meaning of “garbage”. The contiguity of those fragments produces an anti-Milanese poem with a strong moralizing effect towards the “pecore automatiche” (“automatic sheep”), the unaware automatons, inhabiting Milan.

To mention the words ‘wheels’, ‘assemblage’, ‘mechanism’ while trying to explain Balestrini’s poems means also to draw the attention to their concrete aspect, that is, their participation in the problematization of poetry as a genre elaborated by the concrete poets of the ‘50s and ‘60s. For them, the problem was not only to transform poetry into something new with regard to poetic tradition but also, and foremost “to make poetry become total art

⁴⁵⁸ I am here relying on the critical apparatus and footnotes provided by Alfredo Giuliani.

through such transformation.”⁴⁵⁹ Total art is meant in its Futurist sense: “the totalizing gesture of new poetry is [...] always [...] an attempt to involve the reader on all levels, to make him a co-responsible accomplice, and a co-author tomorrow: according to [Mary Ellen] Solt, the reader is to be able to conceive of the poem as an object, and to participate in the creative act of the poet.”⁴⁶⁰

According to Alfredo Giuliani – referring to Balestrini’s poem ‘De Magnalibus Urbis Mediolani’ – “the cultural interpolations are diluted or melted down, absorbed into the teeming, dilating magma of the context, and [...] their value resides entirely in their peculiar tone, their aura, of being ‘hackneyed phrases’.”⁴⁶¹ The non-musicality of these fragments makes them exist ‘concretely’ like unrelated sound-events, the isolated sounds or noises recorded with the techniques used by concrete musicians: *concrete music* – the term was coined by Pierre Schaeffer in 1948 – is produced by isolating and recording a concretely existing sonorous event, be it sound or noise. According to Gian Paolo Renello,⁴⁶² this *objet musical* finds its correspondent in Balestrini’s “*verbal fact*”.⁴⁶³ The work achieved through montage, Bürger tells us, is *not organic*.

On the other hand, it is hard to clarify how much of the poems’ *induced meaning* is aleatory if not entirely reducible to a purely ludic dimension: the montage reveals itself as the most ironical gesture desacrating the romantic notion of creativity. Nevertheless, the creative

⁴⁵⁹ “far sì che la poesia, attraverso questa trasformazione, si proponga come arte totale”. A. Spatola, *Verso la poesia totale*, p. 15. My translation.

⁴⁶⁰ “Il gesto totalizzante della nuova poesia è [...] sempre [...] un tentativo di coinvolgere il lettore a tutti i livelli, per farne oggi un corresponsabile e un complice, e domani un coautore: secondo [Mary Ellen] Solt il lettore ‘deve essere ora in grado di percepire il poema come oggetto, e di partecipare all’atto creativo del poeta’”, *ibid.*, p. 33. My translation. Concrete poetry is thus considered by its authors as an instance of the ‘open work’.

⁴⁶¹ A. Giuliani’s footnote, *I Novissimi* [Eng], p. 317; “[...] gli inserti culturali sono stemperati e assorbiti nel magma formicolante e dilatato del contesto, e [...] il loro valore sta tutto nel particolare tono e “alone” di frase usata”, *I novissimi*, p. 127.

⁴⁶² G. P. Renello, ‘Taglio e combinazione: le tecniche della scrittura in Nanni Balestrini’, p. 111.

⁴⁶³ N. Balestrini, ‘Language and opposition’, in *I Novissimi* [Eng], p. 383; ‘Linguaggio e opposizione’, in *I novissimi*, p. 164.

instance is not extinguished altogether: at first, it is limited to the moment of selection of the sources from which the fragments are extrapolated. This creative-selective process is the prerogative unique to the poet and ‘prepares’ for the reader’s possible interpretation. The latter is enacted as a *re-disposition*, a *re-figuration* of the verbal material. The reader becomes a co-creator with the caveat that the potentialities of his possible interpretation-creation are determined at the moment of selection as they depend on the nature and quality of the selected material. The creative-selective act consists “in the appropriation of the Duchampian enunciative condition of the work of art: ‘this is art’, an arbitrary indication, outcome of an equally arbitrary selection choosing ‘this’ object and not ‘that’ one”.⁴⁶⁴ The equivalence of “hackneyed phrases” with literary quotations is confirmed also by Renello: “literary references have neither a cult nor erudite character” – as they have in Sanguineti’s poems, one could add – “their value resides in being hackneyed phrases.”⁴⁶⁵ Balestrini’s technique of montage puts the literary quotation at the same level and of the same status as the *objet trouvé* of everyday communication.

Besides problematizing the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, the montage also calls into question problems of authorship. The notion of authorship undergoes a further problematization in ‘Tape Mark I’ (1961) – a poem created with code and punched cards on an IBM 7070 recombining exclusively literary quotations, i.e. extracts from Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* and Michihiko Hachiya’s *Hiroshima Diary*⁴⁶⁶ – shortly followed by ‘Tape mark II’

⁴⁶⁴ C. Gubbiotti, ‘Travestitismo d’avanguardia’, p. 50. My translation.

⁴⁶⁵ “i riferimenti letterari non hanno carattere dotto o erudito: il loro valore sta nel fatto di essere frasi usate”. G. P. Renello, ‘Taglio e combinazione: le tecniche della scrittura in Nanni Balestrini’, p. 116. My translation.

⁴⁶⁶ Paul Goldwin’s *The Mystery of the Elevator* is widely believed to be one of the sources used by Balestrini in ‘Tape Mark I’. However, the status of this source presents some anomalies that should be investigated further: when not related to Balestrini’s ‘Tape Mark I’, Paul Goldwin as an author’s name does not exist. *The mystery of the Elevator* as a work does not seem to exist either.

(1963).⁴⁶⁷ The 'author' subdivides the excerpts into elements made up by 2 or 3 metrical units. He then marks every element with a code specifying the syntactic possibilities for their combination. According to these indications, the IBM *composes* a six-strophe poem, each strophe composed of different partial combinations of the given texts. The rules of combination depend on the initial codes. In this electronic poem the moment of creation is played out both on the level of the selection of the material and on that of meter. 'Tape mark one' is not included in *I novissimi* but was written the same year as the publication of the anthology. An excerpt is cited here:

La testa premuta sulla spalla, trenta volte
più luminoso del sole io contemplo il loro ritorno,
finché non mosse le dita lentamente e mentre la moltitudine
delle cose accade, alla sommità della nuvola
esse tornano tutte alla loro radice e assumono
la ben nota forma di fungo cercando di afferrare.

I capelli tra le labbra, esse tornano tutte
alla loro radice, nell'accecante globo di fuoco
io contemplo il loro ritorno, finché non muove le dita
lentamente, e malgrado che le cose fioriscano
assume la ben nota forma di fungo cercando
di afferrare mentre la moltitudine delle cose accade.

Nell'accecante globo di fuoco io contemplo
il loro ritorno quando raggiunge la stratosfera mentre la moltitudine

⁴⁶⁷ Gianni Scalia commented that Balestrini's technological, computer-created poetry was the further confirmation that his technique was an uncritical, if not celebratory, reproduction of the automatisms of mass communication and of technological society, "of its rules, of its way of acting; of robotized consumption and production, of an increasingly "cybernetic" reality, of the existing communication system as a monstrous and abstract automatic fetish". This comment by Scalia seems now more symptomatic of the take of the traditional Italian left on the mass media than of the formal reasons motivating Balestrini's experimentalism. Gianni Scalia, 'La nuova avanguardia (o della "misera" della poesia)', in *Avanguardia e neo-avanguardia*, p. 68. My translation.

delle cose accade, la testa premuta
 sulla spalla, trenta volte piú luminose del sole
 esse tornano tutte alla loro radice, i capelli
 tra le labbra assumono la ben nota forma di fungo

("The head pushing against the shoulder, thirty times / as luminous as the sun I
 contemplate their return, / until he slowly moved his fingers and while a multitude / of
 things happens, on top of the cloud / they all come back to their roots and they look like
 / the famous mushroom shape trying to grasp. // Hair on the lips they all go back / to
 their roots, in the blinding ball of fire / I contemplate their return, until he moves his
 fingers / slowly, and despite the fact that things flower / it assumes the well known
 mushroom shape trying / to grasp while a multitude of things happens. // In the blinding
 ball of fire I contemplate / their return when it reaches the stratosphere while the
 multitude / of thing happens, the head pushing against / the shoulder, thirty times as
 luminous as the sun / they all return to their roots, the hair / on the lips assume the
 famous mushroom shape". "Tape Mark 1", my translation) ⁴⁶⁸

Discontinuous syntax, where throughout the composition/reading the word as a single unit
 mutates and assumes different meanings, is a distinguishing feature of computer poetry. In
 this particular instance, the order of clusters of words changes, allowing for their *discursive*,
 although fragmented, organization. The quotations are cut and dismembered into minimum
 units of meanings and are then recombined according to metric rules. The order-less
 fragments from Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* seem finally *recomposed*, or at least, to make sense,
 in the first part of the penultimate verse:

"Mentre la moltitudine delle cose accade nell'accecante
 globo di fuoco, esse tornano tutte
 alla loro radice, si espandono rapidamente

("While a multitude of things happens in the blinding / ball of fire, they all go back / to

⁴⁶⁸ N. Balestrini, *Tutto in una volta*, pp. 23-4.

their roots, they rapidly expand". My translation)⁴⁶⁹

The original quotation is from chapter 16 of *Tao Te Ching*: "The ten thousand things arise together; / in their arising is their return. / Now they flower, / and flowering / sink homeward, / returning to the roots."⁴⁷⁰ Although translations from Chinese vary tremendously, the theme of the return to the roots suggesting the *mystical* equivalence between ending and beginning runs throughout *Tao Te Ching*, sometimes the lines expressing it is just being repeated word by word. (For instance, the last two lines of chapter 16 are repeated at the end of the first verse of chapter 52). In the same way, the lines from *Tao Te Ching* are *repeated* continuously by Balestrini's poetic operation, one consistently problematizing the concept of authorship: he mainly *recycles* fragments and does not write them. The notion of authorship is also a problem in the poem he is quoting from: the existence of Lao Tzu as an author is not recorded; we think he wrote *Tao Te Ching* the same way as we think Homer wrote the *Odyssey*. The apparently random quotations technologically and impersonally interpolated by the computer actually are an instance of *poetics*, the moment where the poetical operation reaches the point of utmost self-reflectivity, its highest level of *literariness*.

The use of the technique of montage determines the absurd – an absurdity that here reaches an almost existential climax – alternation of fragments from the *Tao* – a series of moral precepts inspired by a deeply optimistic 'anarchism' towards reality, humanity's potential and fairness – and from the *Hiroshima Diary* – describing the effects of the atomic bomb blast from its first flash. The result is violently paradoxical, non-sensical. Language is 'iconicised' ('iconicizzato'): on a first reading, "the well known mushroom shape" and "the ball of fire" – images symbolic of the atomic bomb – are on the same level as the vitalistic

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁷⁰ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, p. 22.

principle of the Taoist “multitude of things”. Language is iconicised in the sense that it is entirely de-contextualized from the interplay of textual references constituting its actual historical ‘depth’ and meaning – although the latter can be reconstructed by a second-level reading.

Balestrini’s account of the poetical reasons informing his montage-technique in “Linguaggio e opposizione” goes beyond problems of chance, intention and technology to focus instead on the intrinsically oppositional, and thus ideological, potential of language itself, its capacity to be combined in new shockingly self-generating forms and meanings that disprove the recipient’s perception of the daily commonplace enforced by the language of the mass media. In all this, technology is a means (not an end in itself) for

regarding language as the object of poetry, language understood as *verbal fact*, i.e not used instrumentally, but assumed in its totality, escaping the accidentality that from time to time makes it reproduce optical images, narrate events, purvey concepts [...] The fundamental attitude thus becomes one of getting poetry to “prod” words, to lay an ambush for them at the very moment they are bound up in sentences, to do violence to the structures of language, pushing all their properties to their breaking point. Such an attitude is meant to stimulate these properties, the intrinsic and extrinsic charges of language, and to provoke the unprecedented, baffling cruxes and encounters that can make poetry a true whip to the reader’s brain, a brain that gropes through daily life immersed in commonplaces and repetition.⁴⁷¹

The “unprecedented, baffling cruxes and encounters” of words do not obey the rules of signification. The word is reduced to its signic value, to its unrelated ‘thingness’. In

⁴⁷¹ N. Balestrini, ‘Language and opposition’, in *I Novissimi* [Eng], p. 383; “considerare oggetto della poesia il linguaggio, inteso come *fatto verbale*, impiegato cioè in modo non-strumentale, ma assunto nella sua totalità, sfuggendo all’accidentalità che lo fa di volta in volta riproduttore di immagini ottiche, narratore di eventi, somministratore di concetti [...] Un atteggiamento fondamentale del fare poesia diviene dunque lo “stuzzicare” le parole, il tendere loro un agguato mentre si allacciano in periodi, l’imporre violenza alle strutture del linguaggio, lo spingere ai limiti di rottura tutte le sue proprietà. Si tratta di un atteggiamento volto a sollecitare queste proprietà, le cariche intrinseche ed estrinseche del linguaggio, e a provocare quei nodi e quegli incontri inediti e sconcertanti che possono fare della poesia una vera frusta per il cervello del lettore, che quotidianamente annaspa immerso fino alla fronte nel luogo comune e nella ripetizione”, N. Balestrini, ‘Linguaggio e opposizione’, in *I novissimi*, p. 164.

Balestrini's poems, language reaches the degree of physicality and visual concreteness characterizing concrete poetry. For instance, in the section C 7 from *I frammenti del sasso appeso* (*Fragments of the Dangling Rock*) the interchangeability of the position of the fragments defies the modalities of a 'normal', linear reading:

in tutti i modi possibili una pasta di cera
formando è stato visto
per sfuggire a è l'arte di mascherare lo sbriciolarsi
del tempo"

[“in all possible ways” paste of wax
forming has been seen
to escape is the art of masking the crumbling
of time

Niva Lorenzini has pointed out that the experimentalism of *I frammenti del sasso appeso* is very close to that of concrete poetry: the open-endedness and the use of space as a structuring agent brings these “compositional games [...] close to the visual evidence of concrete poetry”.⁴⁷² The functional polivalence of the fragments allows for different readings: “in tutti i modi possibili” “è stato visto” “lo sbriciolarsi del tempo” (“in all possible ways” “the crumbling of time” “has been seen”) or “per sfuggire a” “lo sbriciolarsi” “del tempo” (“to escape from” “the crumbling” “of time”) or again, “è l’arte di mascherare” “lo sbriciolarsi” “del tempo” (“it is the art of masking” “the crumbling” “of time”). Those crossed readings are made possible by the white empty space surrounding the fragments: its presence becomes a sort of structuring agent. The verse as a rhythmic and formal unit is deconstructed and replaced with embryo-like linguistic units, the meaning of which is in a state of unresolved pure potentiality. In *Il sasso appeso* (*The Dangling Rock*), this unresolved potentiality is

⁴⁷² “giochi di composizione [...] ormai prossimi all’evidenza visiva della poesia concreta”. N. Lorenzini, *Il laboratorio della poesia*, p. 68. My translation.

registered also on the thematic level (and here we go back to the problem of interpretation). The theme of the voyage suggested by the opening line of *Il sasso appeso*, “Ma dove stiamo andando col mal di testa la guerra e senza soldi?” (“Where on earth are we going with this headache, the war and no money?”) is developed further: “non c’è pericolo che non arriviamo, pazienti godiamoci il viaggio” (“We’ll get there, don’t worry, relax, let’s enjoy the ride”) only to be immediately contradicted, denied: “tanto non si viaggia [...] tanto non si arriva” (“we are not / really travelling [...] anyway we are not getting there”) and then reaffirmed again: “arriveremo” (“we’ll get there”). The voyage of *Il sasso appeso* is a non-voyage: the reader has to keep this indication in mind in order not to be misled by the many references to travelling, moving, going: “gli uccelli in fuga” (“birds fleeing”), “l’orizzonte di gomma arancio” (“the orange-rubber horizon”), “sedile posteriore vuoto” (“the empty back seat”), “E continua fino alla fine del continente” (“And he goes on to the end of the continent”), “e fuggire l’Europa; oltre il mare” (“and fleeing Europe; beyond the sea”), “l’acceleratore / al massimo dopo la curva” (“the pedal / to the floor after the curve”). The refiguration of all these misleading fragments points to an escape that will not take place.

VII. Concrete Poetry

A digression on concrete poetry may help us to understand Niva Lorenzini’s point. Concrete poetry reduces the word to its material, bodily dimension: the word is a ‘raw’ object, an *objet trouvé*. It goes beyond engagement with another kind of artistic genre, music for instance, and experiments instead with the *non-aesthetic*, with that area of language usually dealt with by the daily communication techniques of the mass media that has not yet been ‘subsumed’ by artistic practice. The ideological and aesthetic task of technological poetry could be seen as the demystification of the language produced by the mass media

(journalism, the advertising industry, the leveling rhetoric produced by television), demystification carried out by turning upside down, if not parodying, the conservative, mainly consumption-oriented meanings produced by the system.⁴⁷³ As Lucio Vetri warns us, the differences between technological poetry and concrete poetry can be minimal: they are both more for the eye than for the ear. ‘Beba coca cola’ (1957), a concrete poem by Décio Pignatari one of the founders of the Brazilian group *Noigandres*, can help highlight the nature of the operation:

Beba	coca	cola
Babe		cola
Beba		coca
Babe	cola	caco
Caco	cola	
	c l o a c a	⁴⁷⁴

Décio Pignatari’s day job was in advertising. There is none of the ambiguity characterizing the poetic message in “beba coca cola”: “coca cola” playfully and ‘smoothly’ works its way to “cloaca” by means of assonance-determined combinations and associations of minimum units of language; “cloaca”, Décio Pignatari makes us notice, has the same letters as “coca cola”. The ideological statement conveyed by the last word towards coca-cola and what it represents is strong and clear, even violent. A ‘specialized’, ‘second level’ reading would add no further information to the poem’s “anti-propaganda”: the desecrating message is straightforward. There are no breaks interrupting the continuum of assonances that, in a way,

⁴⁷³ Cf. L. Vetri, *Letteratura e caos*, p. 177.
⁴⁷⁴ “drink coca cola / drool glue / drink coca(ine) / drool glue shard / shard / glue / cesspool”. Décio Pignatari, in *Teoria da poesia concreta*, p 88.

seems to mimic the perceived ‘naturalness’ of the verbal continuum – hence the ‘surprise’ in the end.

Another example of concrete poetry may be “Wind”⁴⁷⁵, by Eugen Gomringer:

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      w   w
        d   i
          n   n   n
i       d   i   d
          w       w
  
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The meaning becomes clear once the ideogram is read and assimilated by means of a visual, *sensuous*, process: the poem communicates itself. There is nothing *profound* about it: all is in the surface. “Wind” seems to postpone the ‘project of interpretation’ as an intellectual exercise to another more sensory activity, perception. To put it in Susan Sontag’s terms, concrete poems belong to that category of works of art that are *against interpretation*. According to Sontag, “it is possible to elude the interpreters [...] by making works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be ... just what it is”.⁴⁷⁶ The project of interpretation “takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there”,⁴⁷⁷ i.e., it “assimilate[s] Art into Thought, or (worse yet) Art into Culture.”⁴⁷⁸ Nevertheless, Sontag warns that

[o]nce upon a time (a time when art was scarce), interpretation must have been a revolutionary and creative move to interpret works of art. Now it is not. [...] Think of the sheer multiplication of works of art available to every one of us, superadded to the conflicting tastes and odors and sights of the urban environment that bombard our

⁴⁷⁵ M. E. Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, p. 93.
⁴⁷⁶ S. Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation’, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, p. 11.
⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

senses. Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience.⁴⁷⁹

If we go back to concrete poetry, we can appreciate the fact that it requires an adjustment of expectations about the function of interpretation as there are no conditions for the realization of the latter. The mode of fruition of concrete poetry as a type of art is thus extremely congenial to the American 'post-modernist' change in sensibility described by Sontag. The way words and letters are juxtaposed in concrete poetry depends on their relationship to each other as much as it depends on the page as a whole. If one thought of this graphic disposition in relation to the daily experience of the modern consumer, the structuring space of the white page would be equivalent to the 'flat' plasticity of the billboard. Victoria Pineda has pointed out that

the structure of concrete poetry, its sometimes ephemeral configuration, its closeness to graphic art, advertising, and mass media techniques, inscribe the genre within the communication process to which the modern consumer is accustomed: newspaper headlines, simplified syntax. In other words, "high speed communication" which by the way justifies and validates the theoretical principles that concrete poets hold.⁴⁸⁰

Concrete poetry reduces language to its iconic dimension (coca cola – the American way of life). But the communicativeness of the icon, Umberto Eco tells us, can be deceptive, if not false altogether. Already in *Apocalittici e integrati* Eco points out that contemporary society is back to a medieval-like situation where there are more icons to be 'seen' than texts to be 'read'. We have to be careful, he warns, because a society where communication is mainly based on the mediation of the icon is a fractured society with an educated élite of technicians of the image on the one hand and, on the other, a 'mass' of recipients unable to decode the richness of the abstract notions informing the image:

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁰ V. Pineda, 'Speaking about Genre: The Case of Concrete Poetry', p. 387.

The language of the image has always been the instrument of paternalistic societies depriving their directed of the privilege for a forthright and lucid confrontation with a communicated meaning free from the imposing presence of a concrete, convenient and persuasive 'icon'. Behind the direction of any image-language there has always been an élite of strategists of culture educated on the written symbol and the abstract notion.⁴⁸¹

The point Eco is making is that the *use* and *appropriation* of the icon does not necessitate the actual knowledge that *should* be conveyed by it.⁴⁸² For this reason, *perception* should be implemented by *interpretation*: the icon must be not "an invitation to hypnosis"⁴⁸³ but "a provocation for critical thought".⁴⁸⁴ For this to happen, the perceiver is to go beyond the *flat surface* and *sensual immediacy* of the icon, to look 'through' it rather than 'at' it, for the moment of perception is not an end in itself, it has to be overcome so that the process of interpretation can take place. Eco's insights into the social value of the icon were occasioned by the debate on cinema. Both critique of the icon and the notion of interpretation undergo further clarification only in Eco's later works⁴⁸⁵ and yet critique of the icon seems to be inherent in the *poetica* of the *Novissimi* as part of their critique of cultural hedonism.

The anti-mimetic stance of the "novissimi", their "second degree realism" – meant as systematic exploration of language and consistent self-referentiality – also eludes any content-oriented project of interpretation. Within Susan Sontag's terms, the self-referential

⁴⁸¹ "il linguaggio dell'immagine è sempre stato lo strumento lo strumento di società paternalistiche che sottraevano ai propri diretti il privilegio di un corpo a corpo lucido col significato comunicato, libera dalla presenza suggestiva di una "icone" concreta, comoda e persuasive. E dietro ad ogni regia del linguaggio per immagini c'è sempre stata una élite di starteghi della cultura educati sul simbolo e sulla nozione astratta". U. Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*, pp. 347-8. My translation. For Eco, the predominance of the icon in everyday life is a trait shared by contemporary society and medieval society. In medieval times, the poor under-educated churchgoer could relate to God by looking at paintings and sacred representations. The mode of such an immediate, 'sensuous' and abstraction-free relationship between subject and image is 'recorded' in literature by the ballad François Villon wrote for his mother: "I'm but a poor old woman, small and wan; / Naught have I read, of naught am well aware. / In church the painted images I scan / Of Paradise, and also of a drear / Place where the wicked boil: these make me fear, / Those others give me joy and happiness". F. Villon, "The Testament Ballade", *Poems*, p. 72.

⁴⁸² For an example of such a situation in contemporary society, one has only to think of the progressive loss of meaning of the 'Che Guevara icon'.

⁴⁸³ "invito all'ipnosi", U. Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*, p. 348. My translation.

⁴⁸⁴ "provocazione alla riflessione critica", *ibid.* My translation.

⁴⁸⁵ Cf. T. De Lauretis, *Umberto Eco*, especially pp. 35-9.

linguistic operation carried out by the “novissimi” can be envisaged as “[p]rogrammatic avant-gardism [...that] experiments with form at the expense of content [... as a] defense against the infestation of art by interpretations”.⁴⁸⁶ This leads to a sort of “neocontenutismo” or, as Giuliani puts it, artistic “*making* [...] coincides with content”.⁴⁸⁷ Although, as we have seen, that according to Sontag this kind of avant-gardism is now obsolete, Umberto Eco puts forward a point of view that seems to be both substantially diverging from Sontag’s and more congenial to the avant-gardist workings eluding interpretation enacted by “*poesia novissima*”. For Eco, poetry both as a genre and the poetic message, is characterized by a high level of “ambiguity” (“ambiguità”) and “self-reflexiveness” (“auto-riflessività”).⁴⁸⁸ From this point of view, “poetry appears as a modality educating to overcome obstacles in order to get to the content, that is, it is an exercise for thought [...]”.⁴⁸⁹ The “obstacles” referred to by Eco give a sense of the *longue durée* of interpretation as an intellectual process and understanding of the formal reasons of the artefact. It should be noticed that both Eco and “*poesia novissima*” on the one side, and Sontag on the other, share a very critical view of “content” as a mimetic notion and they all do so by shifting the problematic (to a different extent) on to a ‘formal’, in a deeply semantic sense, level. Symptomatically, however, Eco’s interest in films is cursory,⁴⁹⁰ while Sontag singles out “the sensuous surface” of the movies as the most appropriate subject for her *anti-intellectual* “erotics of art” on the ground that, given the relative newness of cinema as an art, “films have not been overrun by interpreters”.⁴⁹¹ Eco’s relative

⁴⁸⁶ S. Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation’, p. 11.

⁴⁸⁷ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 25. The English translation of “*fare*” as “*activity*” does not take into account Giuliani’s subtext. For this reason, I translate it as “*making*”; “*quel fare, che [...] sentiamo coincidere con il “contenuto”.*” A. Giuliani, *I Novissimi*, p. xviii.

⁴⁸⁸ U. Eco, ‘Il segno della poesia e il segno della prosa’, *Sugli specchi e altri saggi*, p. 246.

⁴⁸⁹ U. “la poesia appare come una modalità che educa all’ostacolo, che tiene in esercizio il contenuto, ovvero tiene in esercizio il pensiero”, *Ibid.*, p. 259. My translation.

⁴⁹⁰ Cf. Eco’s comments on Michelangelo Antonioni’s films, especially *L’eclisse*, in ‘Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà’, *Opera Aperta*, pp. 276-277.

⁴⁹¹ S. Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation’, pp. 11-14.

“suspicion” towards the icon seems to be confirmed by the poetical operation of the “Novissimi”, one re-stating the qualitative difference between image and discourse, icon and verbal language, and putting forward the primacy of the rigorous task of literature as a form of “high” art as opposed to the “lower” sensuous hedonism of other forms of cultural practice.

VIII. The Fragment and the Museum

In the examples of concrete poetry we have seen, the poetic message is not ambiguous. The same cannot be said of Nanni Balestrini, usually considered the most concrete of all the Novissimi poets. Balestrini’s adoption of the forms characterizing concrete poetry is finalized to a further complication, not facilitation, of the communicative function. Discursive organization is flaunted on a graphic visual level where it proliferates disorganically. The poetic operation systematically deconstructs it, subverting and denying the communicative function of the *langue*. Also, even at its most concrete stage, i.e. the series of collages *Cronogrammi*, Balestrini’s poetic operation does not carry out the qualitative equation between words *and* images. As observed by Robert Lumley, *Cronogrammi* “consists of words and sentences cut out from newspapers in their original typology and turned in collages”⁴⁹². *Words* and *sentences* are both instances of discourse. Here, their “typology” also gives a precise, self-referential indication of the discursive area, in terms of the situation of utterance they come from – the newspapers.

There is one fundamental feature that dramatically differentiates the status of the

⁴⁹² R. Lumley, ‘The Historian, the Poet and the Semiologist: Perspectives on the Post ‘68 Decade’, p. 243.

word in Balestrini's poems from that of other examples of concrete poetry. It is not totally accurate to state that in his poems the word is *entirely* reduced to its degree zero as the indeterminacy (pure potentiality) the word enjoys on a semantic level is counterbalanced by the determinations and characterizations imposed by the materials it comes from. In Umberto Eco's words, "Balestrini's style is characterized by the fact that you can always tell when and if he is composing something by having decomposed something else, but it is questionable whether that recycling operation has silenced the original texts."⁴⁹³ The more or less recognizable source providing the *fragments* for the *assemblage*-operation may be a literary text, as in some of the early poems of the period of the *Novissimi*, or author-less collective texts *from* an historical circumstance, as in the case of *I muri della Sorbona*, the transcriptions of phrases and slogans covering the walls around the Sorbonne in May 1968 in posters and graffiti exhibited at the Tartaruga gallery (Rome) the same year. Here the assemblage is at once a detached, objective *report* operation, with "no individual authorship or creativity. No signatures. No authentication [...] a copy"⁴⁹⁴ and a blatantly ideological and politically biased "gesture exploiting the possibilities [...] of visual poetry not on a formalistic level but on an existential one".⁴⁹⁵

The poetic word is extrapolated from its context: it is alienated, reduced to a fragment still bearing the echoes and suggestions of its original condition, an immediate past irretrievable, continuously hinted at but lost in its organic totality. The word enjoys a depth that is both historic and social: the assemblage defies the pseudo-flatness of the verbal continuum by introducing *difference as a value*. On the one hand, the fragment does not

⁴⁹³ "Un tratto dello stile di Balestrini è che si riconosce sempre se quando egli sta componendo qualcosa avendo scomposto qualcosa d'altro, ma rimane in ogni caso il sospetto che quest'opera di riciclo non abbia messo del tutto a tacere i testi originali". U. Eco, 'Stele per Balestrini'. My translation.

⁴⁹⁴ R. Lumley, 'The Historian, the Poet and the Semiologist: Perspectives on the Post '68 Decade', p. 244.

⁴⁹⁵ "sfruttando [...] ad un livello non più formalistico bensì esistenziale, risolto in un gesto le risorse [...] della poesia visiva", M. Calvesi, *Avanguardia di Massa*, p. 141. My translation.

belong any more to the totality from which it is extrapolated, while on the other, it relates only disorganically with the other fragments it has been assembled with. It never is the equal part of a totality, its identity being based on difference. The operation reaches its utmost intensity in Balestrini and yet it is a trait common to all the Novissimi poets. In Sanguineti's *Laborintus* fragments of socio-historically determined *languages* introduce *difference* into the *langue* deconstructing it, making it a dis-organic totality. The same technique is traceable also in Elio Pagliarani's *La Ragazza Carla* where the uneven succession of 'chunks' of different idiolects creates rifts and ruptures signifying the irreducible social and subjective diversity of the 'characters' of the epic poem. In Alfredo Giuliani's poems the subject's imaginative process is first decomposed and then rearranged into "schizomorphic" fragments, as the poetic form of the disjointed and discontinuous mental processes by which contemporary man gets a grasp on the velocity of modern life. In Antonio Porta, the montage is the outcome of a cognitive uncertainty finally drawing its vitalistic impetus from a phallic-linguistic urge to penetrate reality.

The techniques of each of the Novissimi may vary: the effect is always one of *ostranenie* specifically meant as "reduction of the I". The latter is the subject's impossibility – be it the creative subject or the reader – to identify with the *langue*, experience a sort of *mirroring* with it as if it were a homogeneous and singular totality, a vantage point able to express the subject in its actual individuality and uniqueness. The "reduction of the I" is the alienation of the subject from language, the systematic resistance, made technique, against *being spoken by it*.

As suggested by Gianni Celati (commenting on Walter Benjamin) the privilege of the fragment is that of a pure difference not reducible to a negative form of identity. Its paramount effect is that of *ostranenie*: the fragment signals "something I cannot identify with

because it refuses to be my direct mirror.”⁴⁹⁶ It fails to refer me back to an objective (inter-subjective) origin I can share with other subjects. As a non-paradigm for both *thought* and *word* it refers to no objective (inter-subjective) common origin. It can only be lived once: “[t]he thought and the word based on the fragment are a way of thinking the totality of social relationships not as harmony, concordance or conciliations but as discrepancy and separation: ‘a disposition that does not compose but juxtapose’.”⁴⁹⁷ To experience the fragment, the archaeological debris, the monadic remain of a lost origin, is to experience modernity, i.e. to direct a creative gaze at modern tradition: “the modern gaze is the archaeological gaze directed at our being [envisaged] not as originary unity ... but as fragmented ruins, a continuous having-been.”⁴⁹⁸ The fragment of the Novissimi, the linguistic debris that has been cut out of its original terrain, can be put on the same level as Charles Baudelaire’s *objet démodé*, Arthur Rimbaud’s odd *relics* and *souvenirs* operating a re-vitalization of the word, a new poetic “alchemy” going beyond a conventional notion of beauty.⁴⁹⁹ (“J’aimais les peintures idiotes, dessus de portes, décors, toiles de saltimbanques, enseignes, enluminures populaires; la littérature démodée, latin d’église, livres érotiques sans orthographe, romans de nos aïeules, contes de fées, petits livres de l’enfance, opéras vieux, refrains niais, rythmes naïfs.”) and the Surrealists’ reinterpretation of Rimbaud’s *conneries*, i.e. André Breton’s *cabinet de curiosités*. In *Nadja* Breton writes: “je m’étais rendu au ‘marché aux puces’ de

⁴⁹⁶ “qualcosa in cui non mi posso identificare perché rifiuta di essere il mio specchio diretto”. G. Celati, ‘Il bazar archeologico’, p. 208. My translation. My thanks to Claudia Nocentini for bringing this article to my attention.

⁴⁹⁷ “[i]l pensiero e la parola basati sul frammento sono un modo di pensare i rapporti degli insiemi mondani non come armonia, concordanza o conciliazioni, ma come divergenza e disgiunzione: “una disposizione che non compone ma giustappone [...]”, *ibid.*, p. 205 (Celati is here quoting from Maurice Blanchot). My translation.

⁴⁹⁸ “lo sguardo moderno è uno sguardo archeologico, che coglie l’essere non come unità originaria [...] ma come frammentarietà di rovine, continuo essere-stato”. *Ibid.*, pp. 202-3. My translation.

⁴⁹⁹ “What I liked were absurd paintings, decorations over doorways, stage scenery, travelling fairs’ backcloths, inn-signs, cheap coloured prints; literature gone out of fashion, church Latin, erotic books with bad spelling, novels our grandmothers used to read, fairy-tales, little books for children, old operas, meaningless refrains, crude rhythms”. A. Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell, Collected poems*, translated by M. Sorrell, p. 235. Parallel French text, p. 234.

Saint-Ouen (j'y suis souvent, en quête de ces objets qu'on trouve nulle part ailleurs, démodés, fragmentés, inutilisables, presque incompréhensibles, pervers enfin au sens où je l'entends et où je l'aime [...])⁵⁰⁰. Or again, Borges' passage quoting "'a certain Chinese encyclopedia' in which it is written that 'animals are divided into: '(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies'"'.⁵⁰¹ The fragment shatters all the landmarks of *our* thoughts by introducing a disorder – in Michel Foucault's words –

in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the *heteroclite*; and that word should be taken in its most literal, etymological sense: in such a state, things are 'laid', 'placed', 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all.⁵⁰²

The fragment, the randomly encountered odd object, l'*objet démodé* or the exotic object, is the entity that has not been taxonomized yet and has not been thought of as the organic, functional part of an orderly collectivity. It is the 'aesthetic ground' where the avant-garde meets with modernism: T.S. Eliot starts the discursive practice of the fragment that will eventually lead to the *Waste Land* in *Gerontion*: "my house is a decayed house"⁵⁰³ ('Gerontion') and then "these fragments I have shored against my ruins"⁵⁰⁴.

The de-contextualized, not yet taxonomized, object is the opposite of the catalogued object exposed to the museified gaze. The former repels intersubjective communication just in the same way as the latter is supposed to favour it. The function of the museum as a post-

⁵⁰⁰ A. Breton, *Nadja*, p. 55.

⁵⁰¹ Quoting from M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. xvii.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, p. xix.

⁵⁰³ T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot*, p. 37.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

revolutionary public space was that of assuring, in Bruno-Nassim Abouddrar's words, "les conditions logiques de la communication intersubjective; ce qui fait que des individus se reconnaissent et communiquent."⁵⁰⁵ Intersubjective communication was the essential aim at a time when the social pact was being reforged: Art as an institution was called to "intervenir dans l'espace public du musée pour sa capacité à mobiliser la communication intersubjective", ⁵⁰⁶ in short, to form the citizens as equal members of the *demos* through appreciation of the *beautiful*, to form the *public* as collectivity. The museum as an institution called Art to serve a political function, not an aesthetic one. ⁵⁰⁷ By problematizing the conditions of intersubjective communication the aesthetics of the fragment subverts the political function of Art as an institution and forces it back to its aesthetic function alone.

IX. Elio Pagliarani, Alfredo Giuliani, Antonio Porta.

The museum draws the notion of and necessity for a fully functional intersubjective communication from wider social workings and capitalist dynamics: straightforward quantification of value – be it the value of money, labour, or commodities – is at the base of capitalist exchange. But the value of the fragment is based on uniqueness, rupture, discontinuity and incommensurability. *Speaking in fragments* is equal to sabotaging the rationale of communication. Non-communicativeness becomes the yardstick of the radicalization of poetry's antagonistic relationship with regard to the *langue*. Alfredo Giuliani: "the passion of 'speaking in verses' jars with today's enveloping consumption to which language is subjected".⁵⁰⁸ Poetry acquires the awareness of playing a role in the

⁵⁰⁵ B.-N. Abouddrar, *Nous n'irons plus au musée*, p. 56.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵⁰⁸ A. Giuliani, *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 23; "La passione di "parlare in versi" urta, da un lato, contro l'odierno avvolgente consumo e sfruttamento commerciale cui la lingua è sottoposta", *I novissimi*, p. xvi.

formation of the reader's consciousness, to be a social medium producing a form of antagonistic 'imagination' in a way that is at once intellectual and sensuous: "poetry expresses in its whole being a way of thinking and feeling. Why are we so concerned with diction, syntax meter, and so on? Because if we grant that, in its 'contemporaneity', poetry acts directly on the reader's vitality, then what matters most is its linguistic efficacy".⁵⁰⁹ The task/content of poetry is to confer sense upon the senselessness of daily life, to "recompos[e...] meanings of experience"⁵¹⁰ and it can do so by fracturing the pseudo-naturality of the verbal continuum by "open[ing] up a passage: in mirroring reality, it must answer our need to go 'through the looking-glass'".⁵¹¹

"Poesia novissima" elaborates the programmatic *revitalization* of the poetic word through the "unexpected use of discourse" leading to systematic complication of the communication and signification process: "The harshness and sobriety, the analytical fury, the irreverent jolts, the unexpected use of discourse and 'prose' – in short, all that one expects not to find in other poems and one finds in our poems".⁵¹² It is from the point of view of the relationship between "vitality" and *discourse* that the difference between the poesia novissima and concrete poetry finally becomes specific. The theoreticians of concrete poetry proclaim the historical necessity to do away with discursivity altogether in order to increase the vitality of the poetic word within modern conditions. As Augusto de Campos puts it in "A Moeda Concreta Da Fala", "[t]he true social mission of poetry would be to stir latent

⁵⁰⁹ A. Giuliani, 'Introduction' to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 21; "la poesia esprime con tutta se stessa un modo di pensare e di sentire. Perché ci siamo tanto preoccupati del lessico, della sintassi, del metro e via dicendo? Perché se conveniamo che, in quanto 'contemporanea', la poesia agisce direttamente sulla vitalità del lettore, allora ciò che conta in primo luogo è la sua efficacia linguistica", 'Introduzione' a *I novissimi*, xiv.

⁵¹⁰ A. Giuliani, 'Introduction' to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 24; "produrre una ricomposizione dei seignifiacti dell'esperienza", 'Introduzione' a *I novissimi*, p. xviii.

⁵¹¹ A. Giuliani, 'Introduction' to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 20; "la poesia [deve] aprirci un varco: nel rispecchiare la realtà rispondere al nostro bisogno di attraversare lo specchio", 'Introduzione' a *I novissimi*, p. xiv.

⁵¹² A. Giuliani, 'Introduction' to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 23; "L'asprezza e la sobrietà, la furia analitica, lo scatto irriverente, l'uso inopinato dei mezzi del discorso, la "prosa", insomma quello che non si è abituati a trovare nelle altre poesie e che si trova invece nelle nostre", 'Introduzione' a *I novissimi*, p. xvi.

energies in language so as to overthrow its petrifying dogmas and to revitalize it”⁵¹³. In order to do so, the poetic word has to break free from “the inquisitorial patterns of language” because the linguistic system “deprives the word of its own vitality, transforming it then in a tumulus-taboo, dead cell in a living organism.”⁵¹⁴ Also according to Adriano Spatola, who is here quoting from Haroldo de Campos, “[c]oncrete poetry speaks the language of today’s man. It rejects the craftsmanship, discursivity and metaphor transforming the poetry of our time – a time marked by technological progress and non-verbal communication – in anachronism, creating a vast gap between poet and public”.⁵¹⁵ The opposite is true for poesia novissima: the latter judges the renovation of poetry as a genre on the grounds of its unscrupulous, novel use of ‘discursiveness’, and as a consequence, of meter. Giuliani states that “[m]etrical restlessness is a symptom revealing the poet’s anxiety about reality”.⁵¹⁶ Indeed, meter expresses a fundamental tension in poetry as a genre connecting it at one end to pure music and patterned sound, and at the other end to conversation and purely discursive uses of language. Meter ties together music and discourse, a vitalistic notion of poetry and the possibility of interpretation. The “novissimi” replace the old syllabic system with *cola*, i.e. “rhythmic-semantic groups”⁵¹⁷ making up a new metric system. Within such conception of poetry, rhythm is inseparable from the discursive organization of language.

In his second introduction to *I novissimi*, Alfredo Giuliani expresses critical

⁵¹³ I am here using Victoria Pineda’s translation, V. Pineda, ‘Speaking about Genre: The Case of Concrete Poetry’, p. 388; “A verdadeira missão social da poesia seria essa de arregimentar as energias latentes na linguagem para destronar os seus dogmas petrificadores”, *Teoria da poesia concreta*, p. 116.

⁵¹⁴ I am here using Victoria Pineda’s translation, V. Pineda, ‘Speaking about Genre: The Case of Concrete Poetry’, p. 388; “exaure à palavra sua vitalidade própria, transformand-a logo num túmulo-tabu, célula-morta de um organismo vivo”, *Teoria da poesia concreta*, p. 116.

⁵¹⁵ “La poesia concreta parla il linguaggio dell’uomo d’oggi. Esa rifiuta l’artigianato, la discorsività e la metafora che trasformano la poesia del nostro tempo – contrassegnato dal progresso tecnologico e dalla comunicazione non-verbale – in anacronismo, provocando quell’abisso fra poeta e il pubblico”. I am quoting from A. Spatola, *Verso la poesia totale*, pp. 84-5. My translation.

⁵¹⁶ A. Giuliani, ‘Verse by Ear’, in *Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 407; [l’] inquietudine metrica è un sintomo per cui si manifesta nel poeta l’angoscia della realtà”, ‘Il verso secondo l’orecchio’, in *I novissimi*, p. 186.

⁵¹⁷ See F. Curi, *La poesia italiana d’avanguardia*, pp. 158-60.

awareness of the ‘iconization’ of language carried out by the mass media. The ‘iconic’ becomes synonymous with the lack of meaning of the everyday: “Non-sense has become ‘iconic’ material, just the way madonnas and angels were for ancient Annunciations”.⁵¹⁸ *Iconicised* language (as in *paroliberismo* and concrete poetry) adopts the structures of immediate visual perception, the functional schematism of the sign. If looked at from Maria Corti’s semiotic perspective, it neither disavows the code nor aims at creating a new one. It accelerates but does not change the mechanisms of the context of reference, the *langue*.

The discursive organization of social relationships depends on the internal relationships between words: to ‘iconize’ language, to abolish completely the richness, depth and consequentiality of the linguistic system means to deprive it of the ideological connotations and of the power relations inscribed in it. As Fausto Curi puts it, “[a] situation of language [... is] a linguistic and ideological universe; it consists of an organic whole of relations and rapports.”⁵¹⁹ Eugenio Montale used the metaphor of “una maglia rotta nella rete”⁵²⁰ (“the broken mail in the net”), or again of “l’anello che non tiene”⁵²¹ (“the ring on the verge of breaking up”) to describe the subject’s casual shocking deep reconnection with the truth lying behind the mere phenomenal appearance of ‘reality’. This kind of existential insight is brought to the highest degree of linguistic self-referentiality by the Novissimi’s notion of poetry as an experience of reality happening in and through language: “*experience as linguistic making*”.⁵²²

The technique of the ‘montage’ and combinatory writing disrupts the pseudo-neutrality of language as a medium while re-inventing poetry as a genre. The assembled

⁵¹⁸ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 46.

⁵¹⁹ “[u]na situazione di linguaggio [...] è un universo ideologico-linguistico; consiste cioè in un insieme solidale di relazioni e di rapporti”, F. Curi, ‘Nota sull’arte tecnologica’, *Ordine e disordine*, p. 112. My translation.

⁵²⁰ E. Montale, ‘In limine’, *Ossi di seppia*.

⁵²¹ E. Montale, ‘I limoni’, *Ossi di seppia*.

⁵²² “*un esperire come fare linguistico*”, L. Vetri, *Letteratura e caos*, p. 157. My translation.

fragment of the *poesia novissima* is *discursive*, with words still retaining the vestiges of syntactic order rather than *paroliberismo*. Discourse is first of all an anti-metaphysical instance: poetry is a post-Edenic language, not the direct intuition of reality in its essence. Poetry is discourse in the etymological sense of the word: *discurrere*, means circulate around things, and this implies the impossibility of ever seizing them in their organic wholeness. And discourse also in the sense of the *abbassamento* [lowering] of the lyrical genre carried out by prosaic, narrative verse. But to understand the process of *abbassamento*, meant as the use of discursive genres from everyday communication and of ordinary words not belonging to the literary tradition, as a process of facilitation of poetic communication, would be rather misleading. The *apparent communication* of the poetic use of words not belonging, traditionally, to the genre, with terms coming from everyday vocabulary, is counterbalanced by the peculiar workings of the technique of the montage: the fragment, be it from 'high' or 'low' forms of linguistic culture, exasperates the ambiguity of the poetical message by sabotaging its fundamental syntactic workings.

The assembling and overlaying of many different *languages* and *idiolects* introduces a sense of discontinuity, non-linearity and conflict within the verbal continuum. It disrupts the *langue* while unmasking its economic and ideological determinations. The ensuing shock and surprise increases the "reader's vitality". In Elio Pagliarani's words: "[i]t is pointless to deny the equation lyric = poetry without reinventing the literary genres [...] poetry broadens its contents, yet cannot do so without correspondingly broadening the poetic vocabulary. But to enrich the vocabulary does not necessarily mean enriching speech, it can even mean upheaval and confusion. No word has an unlimited capacity for adaptation [...]"⁵²³ This is particularly

⁵²³ E. Pagliarani, 'Syntax and Genres', in *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 385; "[n]on ha senso negare l'identificazione lirica = poesia senza una reinvenzione dei generi letterari [...] la poesia allarga i suoi contenuti, ma non può farlo se non dilatando in corrispondenza il vocabolario poetico. Ma arricchire il vocabolario, non significa

evident in Pagliarani's long poem *La ragazza Carla*, a crossing between the genres of choral poetry and epic narrative where 'blocks' of lines express clashing voices and conflicting points of views. To achieve this effect, Pagliarani exploits exactly the lack of adaptation of the word, its capacity to retain its ideological value once it is organized in meaningful structures or fragments. The combination of fragments formed according to different, if not diverging, discursive rules, brings *difference* and asymmetry into the verbal continuum. The latter is fractured both visually – with italics, indented margin, block letters – and discursively, the fractures being abrupt and detached by the subjective linguistic responsibility of the characters. For instance, the following excerpt from a law reference book expresses by means of contiguity and metonymy one of the characters' point of view on the necessity of a third world war:

“FONDAMENTO DEL DIRITTO DELLE GENTI, L'ISTITUTO
DELLA GUERRA E' ANTICO QUANTO GLI UOMINI: A DIRIMERE
LE CONTROVERSIE FRA GLI STATI, SIA PURE COME ESTREMA RATIO
NULLA DI PIÙ RISOLUTIVO ED EFFICACE DEL RICORSO
A CODESTO, CHE LA DOTTRINA CONFIGURA E LA PRASSI TUTELA
COME SANZIONE DECISIVA CUI SI AFFIDA
IL RIPRISTINO DELLA VIOLATA LEGALITÀ INTERNAZIONALE
– NON C'È DA FARSI ILLUSIONE, NON È TALE LEGGE SENZA SANZIONE –
E LA SCIENZA SPECIFICA, I TRATTATI, DAL GROTIUS AI GIORNI NOSTRI
NE ILLUSTRANO LE RAGIONI E LA FUNZIONE DELLA GUERRA-SANZIONE)

(*La ragazza Carla*, II, sec. 6)

(CORNERSTONE TO THE RIGHTS OF PEOPLES, THE INSTITUTION / OF WAR IS AS OLD AS
HUMANITY: TO RESOLVE / QUARRELS AMONG STATES, BE IT AS LAST RESORT /
NOTHING MORE RESOLUTE AND EFFCACIOUS THAN RECOURSE / TO THIS, AS
REPRESENTED IN DOCTRINE AND GUARANTEED IN PRACTICE / A DECISIVE SANCTION
UPON WHICH RELIES / THE RESTORATION OF VIOLATED INTERNATIONAL LAW
WITHOUT SANCTIONS – / AND SCIENCE SPECIFIES, ALL TREATIES, FROM GROTIUS TO

necessariamente arricchire il discorso, può anche voler dire che si arreca turbamento e confusione. Nessun vocabolo ha illimitate capacità di adattamento”, ‘La sintassi e i generi’, in *I novissimi*, p. 166.

Register and prosody change suddenly only a few lines after, when some passages in italics provide a humble-toned, emotional commentary coming from the ‘inside’ and expressing a private protest against the recently ended Second World War:

*Ci sono anche quelli che a sera
si tolgono un occhio mettendolo accanto
alla scrittura di Churchill, sul comodino,
intanto che fumano la sigaretta:
è un occhio fasullo, di vetro, ma è vera
l'orbita cava nel volto.*

(*La ragazza Carla*, II, sec. 6)

*(There are also those who at night / take out their eye putting it next to / the writings of
Churchill, on the night stand, / while they smoke a cigarette:/ it's a phoney eye, glass,
but what's real / is the socket in the face.)*

The sociological position of Carla – a girl in need of work taking typing lessons at night school, finally recruited as a typist by an Import-Export firm – is rendered by means of the fragmentation of *language* into different ideologically and economically determined *languages* or idiolects. These pre-exist both the poetic consciousness appropriating them and the characters in the poem to which they are related metonymically. The conflict generated by their contiguity enacts the class and emotional tension endured by Carla, her dislike for her boss and for her new position in the world. For the reader, it becomes rather difficult to determine who is the actual subject of the enunciation among the characters, if not the poet himself. This is the most apparent corollary of what Guido Guglielmi has defined as the “plurivocality” (“plurivocalità”) of Pagliarani’s verses: “his poetry does not aim at the constitution of a *koiné*, a common language vitalized by the influence of dialects and other languages, but relates different languages without mixing them. And it makes them shriek.

They remain firmly separated. This separation goes beyond typographic changes.”⁵²⁴ Pagliarani’s characters are related metonymically to language in the sense that his interest “is oriented towards the spoken word, the intonation of the voice, and first and foremost to the plurality of voices. In this way he does not construct actions but linguistic characters.”⁵²⁵

Forms of popular culture seem to influence but also define *La ragazza Carla* more than any other poem contained in *I Novissimi* or by Elio Pagliarani. This point has been strongly stressed by Alessandra Briganti who has pointed out that “‘La ragazza Carla’ takes on the characteristics of a movie script inspired by the style of a neo-realistic popular drama, complete with captions, monologues, dialogues, changes of scene, flash backs.”⁵²⁶ The popular melodrama, the film, the neo-realistic film provide the ‘material’, the ‘matter’ making up the fragments of the montage. Briganti comments that “the montage [...] determines the displacement of the materials taken from the stereotypes of popular drama [displacement] from the series linked to neo-realistic mimesis to the series linked to the model of epic writing reworked towards an expressionist direction.”⁵²⁷ The montage reveals itself as the critical and objective, i. e. experimental in a modernist sense, re-working of *lower*, kitsch cultural materials, but also of literary forms that were once considered innovative, but have now lost their capacity for shock and innovation – hence the displacement from the neo-realistic series to the expressionist series. Their lack of cultural value justifies

⁵²⁴ “la sua poesia non punta alla costituzione di una *koiné*, di una lingua comune vitalizzata dai contributi dei dialetti o di altre lingue, ma mette in relazione le diverse lingue senza mescolarle. E le fa stridere. Esse restano infatti nettamente separate. E non solo quando a separarle è un cambiamento di carattere tipografico”; G. Guglielmi, ‘In forma di recitativo’, p. 23. I am quoting from A. Cortellessa’s *Introduzione* to Elio Pagliarani, *Tutte le poesie (1946-2005)*, p. 22. My translation.

⁵²⁵ “va alla parola parlata, all’intonazione della voce, e soprattutto alla pluralità delle voci. Così egli non costruisce delle azioni, ma dei personaggi linguistici”, *ibid.* My translation.

⁵²⁶ “*La ragazza Carla* assume così, tra l’altro, anche il carattere di un copione cinematografico ispirato ai modi del melodramma popolare di stampo neorealista, completo di didascalie, monologhi, dialoghi, cambiamenti di scena, flash back”, A. Briganti, *Introduzione* to Elio Pagliarani, *Poesie da recita*, p. 9. My translation.

⁵²⁷ “il montaggio [...] determina lo spostamento dei materiali desunti dagli stereotipi del dramma popolare dalla serie legata alla mimesi neorealista alla serie collegata al modello di scrittura epica lavorato in direzione espressionista”, *ibid.* My translation.

their being treated as passive *raw* material to be re-formed, objectified, acted upon through assemblage and montage.

The metonymic treatment of Carla as both a poetic character and a female subject sheds some light on the relationship between *genre* and *gender*, that is to say on how lowly valued cultural entities and genres come to be genderized. Carla as a character is first introduced with a description of her 'environmental setting', the bleak Milanese industrial periphery where she lives with her mother, her sister and brother-in-law: "Di là dal ponte della ferrovia / una traversa di viale Ripamonti / c'è la casa di Carla, di sua madre, e di Angelo e Nerina" (*La ragazza Carla*, I, sec. 1, "On the other side of the railroad bridge / a street off Viale Ripamonti is Carla's house, her mother's Angelo's and Nerina's"); then in her 'cultural setting', cinema: "e i film che Carla non li può soffrire / un film di Jean Gabin può dire il vero" (*ibid.*, "and the movies that Carla cannot stand them / a Jean Gabin movie can speak the truth") and finally with the characterization of her emotions and her sexual modesty (also with allusion to a sexual harassment): "spaventato / il cuore impreparato, per esempio, a due mani / che piombano sul petto / Solo pudore non è che la fa andare / fuggitiva nei boschi di cemento" (*ibid.*, "a heart / frightened and unprepared, for instance, for two hands / that swoop on your breast / Modesty alone is not what drives her / a fugitive in cement forests"). Cinema comes back later on in the poem in the form of a flashing fragment disturbing Carla's modesty with images of sensual decadence: "Sagome dietro la tenda / Marlene con il bocchino sottile / le sete i profumi i serpenti" (*La ragazza Carla*, III, sec.1, "Shapes behind the curtain / Marlene with that slender cigarette holder / the silk the perfumes the serpents"). The working class environment, forms of 'low' mass culture (i.e. the cinema and neo-realistic popular drama) and the informal spoken language ridden with grammar errors ("and the movies that Carla cannot stand them") are here all bound up with a female character and her

female characteristics: her confused sentimentality, emotions and sexual modesty.

From the point of view of the neo-avant-garde's experimentalism, Elio Pagliarani's use of montage is an attempt at breaking up the relationship between language and subjective responsibility: as pointed out by Curi, this is a trait all Novissimi poets, Nanni Balestrini, Edoardo Sanguineti, Alfredo Giuliani and Antonio Porta, share. And yet, Pagliarani does not bring the operation to the degree of extreme non-communicativeness and self-reflectivity deployed, for instance, by Sanguineti and Balestrini. The lyrical pathos of the final section of *La ragazza Carla* betrays "a trace of personal involvement"⁵²⁸ of the poet, his *visible* intervention allowing for a 're-composition' of the reader's experience of the poem and of the irreducible differences therein contained. This cathartic closure is attained by means of the alienation effect of the Greek tragic chorus:

*Ma non basta comprendere per dare
empito al volto e farsene diritto:
non c'è risoluzione nel conflitto
storia esistenza fuori dell'amare
altri, anche se amore importi amare
lacrime, se precipiti in errore
o bruci in folle o guasti nel convitto
la vivanda, o sradichi dal fitto
pietà di noi e orgoglio con dolore.*

(*La ragazza Carla*, III, sec. 7)

(Yet understanding is not enough to give / impetus to the face and make it law: / there is no solution to the conflict / history existence outside of loving / others, even if love means loving / tears, if it falls into error / or burns in neutral or food rots / at banquet, or from the thick yanks pity / for ourselves and painful pride.)

Pagliarani's multilayered pluridiscursive technique challenges the boundaries of poetry as a genre: this is a trait he shares with the other Novissimi poets as they all carry out "the

⁵²⁸ "la traccia di una partecipazione personale", N. Lorenzini, *Il laboratorio della poesia*, p. 143. My translation.

decomposition of the syntactic structure, defamiliarization of language from its semantic connotations, disruption of rapports [and the] interweaving of different layers and miscellany of styles.”⁵²⁹ And yet, in Pagliarani, the operation takes on a distinctively narrative form. As pointed out by Andrea Cortellessa, “Pagliarani’s word is constitutively a *narrative* word”⁵³⁰. Mikhail Bakhtin’s considerations on the novelistic word confirm Cortellessa’s insight. According to Bakhtin, poetry is characterized by ‘monologic’ language, that is, language coming from a single source or speaker having an unmediated relation to “his unitary and singular ‘own’ language”:⁵³¹

The poet is determined by the idea of a monolithic and unitary enunciation, monologically isolated [...] He must use language as a unitary intentional totality: none of his stratification, pluridiscursivity, let alone plurilinguism, can influence the poetic work substantially. For this reason the poet deprives the word of other people’s intentions. He uses only certain words and forms in a way that they lose their link with given intentional strata and given contexts.⁵³²

The linguistic collage introduces “heteroglossia”, “socio-ideological languages”, contrast, conflict and non-linear dynamism into poetry as a genre. The Novissimi’s use of the technique stems from the perceived total lack, on the part of the ‘creative’ subject, of linguistic autonomy and freedom, what Bakhtin calls “the linguistic face of the author accounting for every word as if it were his”.⁵³³ It denounces the linguistic autonomy of the subject as sheer illusion, the subject’s linguistic responsibility being conculcated by the

⁵²⁹ “la scomposizione del tessuto sintattico, lo straniamento del linguaggio dalle sue caratteristiche semantiche, lo sconvolgimento dei rapporti di relazione, l’intreccio di piani diversi e la mescolanza di toni stilistici”, N. Lorenzini, *Il laboratorio della poesia*, p. 17. My translation.

⁵³⁰ “quella di Pagliarani è costitutivamente una parola narrativa.” A. Cortellessa, *Elio Pagliarani: Tutte le poesie*, p. 22. My translation.

⁵³¹ M. Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel*, p. 269.

⁵³² “Il poeta è determinato dall’idea di una lingua unica e unitaria e di una enunciazione unitaria, monologicamente isolata [...] Egli deve partire dalla lingua come da un’unitaria totalità intenzionale: nessuna sua stratificazione, pluridiscorsività e tanto meno plurilinguismo devono avere un qualsiasi riflesso sostanziale nell’opera poetica.” M. Bakhtin, *Estetica e romanzo*, pp. 104-5. My translation.

⁵³³ “il volto linguistico dell’autore che risponde di ogni parola come se fosse la sua.” *Ibid.*, p. 105. My translation.

trivializing and reifying massification processes language undergoes on a daily basis. As a gesture, it denounces the subject's alienation from the language. Fausto Curi explains the Novissimi's use of montage as follows: "[t]he subjective verbal act is in jeopardy of being the least personal act ever, the most pathological and alienated: as a consequence, one can only choose a gesture systematically rejecting the fiction of both individuality and subjectivity [...]".⁵³⁴ Montage or, more precisely, linguistic collage, is the device giving *formal objectivity* to the ideological awareness that, given the historical conditions, to handle and process in the first person contemporary verbal material – in Giuliani's words "the 'heteronomous semanticity' the times give the writer"⁵³⁵ – would be yet a further mystification. Giuliani suggests that in order to deploy "his own capacity for contact with the linguistic forms of reality",⁵³⁶ the poet cannot "aspire to a *contemplative* diction which claims to maintain, if not the value and possibility of contemplation, its unreal syntax".⁵³⁷

Compared to the poetry of the other novissimi, Pagliarini's stands out as the moment when the operation of montage reaches an unexpected degree of 'communicative democracy'. Here, the consciousness of the poet does not disappear completely: to the contrary, it becomes an ethical mediator of different and diverging social languages and instances.

The 'theory' of the "reduction of the I" was 'postulated' by Alfredo Giuliani: "[t]he

⁵³⁴ "[l]'atto verbale soggettivo rischia di essere l'atto meno personale che si possa compiere, il più patologico e alienato: non rimane, dunque, che la scelta di un gesto che rifiuti [...] la finzione dell'individualità e della soggettività", F. Curi, *Perdita d'aureola*, p. 243. My translation.

⁵³⁵ A. Giuliani, 'Introduction' to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 24; "la "semanticità eteronoma" che l'epoca offre allo scrittore", 'Introduzione' a *I novissimi*, p. xvii.

⁵³⁶ A. Giuliani, 'Introduction' to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 20; "la propria capacità di contatto con le forme linguistiche della realtà", 'Introduzione' a *I novissimi*, p. xiv.

⁵³⁷ A. Giuliani, 'Introduction' to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 24; "voler usare un linguaggio *contemplativo* che pretenda di conservare non già il valore e la possibilità della contemplazione, ma la sua irreale sintassi", 'Introduzione' a *I novissimi*, pp. xvii-xviii.

‘reduction of the I’ is my last historical possibility for expressing myself subjectively”.⁵³⁸ The montage, or in Giuliani’s words “ ‘schizomorphic’ vision [...] discontinuity of the imaginative process, *asyntactism*, the violent treatment of signs”⁵³⁹ is poetry’s means to gain a grip on itself and the immediacy, velocity and chaotic abruptness of common contemporary language. Giuliani’s understanding of everyday language bears strong similarities to Balestrini’s “*verbal fact*” as Giuliani tells us that common language cannot “be considered negative or positive, but only factual”⁵⁴⁰. Montage and the “reduction of the I” are two faces of the same coin: the poet’s intervention is ‘limited’ to the selection, juxtaposition and montage of fragments of preexisting heterogeneous languages. Not only does montage problematize poetry as a genre but it also puts into question notions of originality and linguistic creativity as it calls attention to the poet’s “capacity to make strange the appropriated linguistic material, that is [to the] formal energy by means of which he de-contextualizes and then re-contextualizes the verbal material”.⁵⁴¹ The montage as used by the neo-avantgarde is also a linguistic instance of ‘realism’, a *tranche de discourse*, so to speak, an extremely polemical variant on the theme of the “mestiere del poeta” (“the poet’s craftsmanship”). Poetic language enters into direct relationship with the language of production (i.e. the language of mass media, specific ideolects, jargons etc). It is at this point that the relationship with neo-realism becomes apparent. As Walter Siti has pointed out, “[i]n reality, the neo-avant-garde cannot be thought of without the polemical, yet present, reference to experimentalism and, through this one, to neo-realism. It inherited from them the

⁵³⁸ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 27; “[l]a “riduzione dell’io” è la mia ultima storica possibilità di esprimermi soggettivamente”, ‘Introduzione’ a *I novissimi*, p. xx.

⁵³⁹ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 24; “la visione “schizomorfa” [...] discontinuità del processo immaginativo, *l’asyntattismo*, la violenza operata sui segni”, ‘Introduzione’ a *I novissimi*, p. xviii.

⁵⁴⁰ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 24; “non si possono considerare in se stesse negative o positive, ma unicamente fattuali”, ‘Introduzione’ a *I novissimi*, p. xvii.

⁵⁴¹ “capacità di straniamento del materiale linguistico desunto, ossia in rapporto all’energia formale con cui compie i gesti di decontestualizzare e ricontestualizzare la materia verbale”, F. Curi, *Perdita d’aureola*, p. 243. My translation.

preoccupation for the “social value” of poetry, the close link between writing and ideology.”⁵⁴²

Curi points out two fundamental variants within the practice of the neo-avantgarde's fragmentation and re-disposition of the linguistic continuum, with Balestrini and Giuliani at the opposite sides: “Balestrini attains the maximum degree of impersonality by speaking [...] by means of already used language, by deriving his verbal material from the clippings taken from other authors' contexts. Giuliani, on the other hand, associates pieces of spoken or written language parodistically counterfeited with the products of a relatively original linguistic invention.”⁵⁴³ The differences between the two poets are symptomatic of their re-working of diverging areas within the literary tradition: while problematizing the notion of chance, Balestrini works within the legacy left behind by Dadaism, whereas Alfredo Giuliani engages with the experimental area of high modernism. Giuliani translated Dylan Thomas and James Joyce's poems besides being strongly influenced by Ezra Pound's Imagism.⁵⁴⁴ From Imagism, he draws a poetic writing based on the succession of ‘emotional images’ and disjointed emotions.⁵⁴⁵ These become ‘semantic states of mind’ unrelated on a logical level: and systematically fragmented, so much so that their succession hardly ever goes beyond an amused parody of the nonsense. While threatening our habitual mental processes, assumptions and interpretive ability, Giuliani's operation calls attention to the ‘sensuous’

⁵⁴² “[i]n realtà la neo-avanguardia italiana non può essere pensata senza il riferimento, polemico ma pur sempre esistente, allo sperimentalismo e, attraverso questo, al neorealismo. Da essi ha ereditato la preoccupazione per il “valore sociale” della poesia, il contatto stretto tra ideologia e scrittura”, W. Siti, *Il realismo dell'avanguardia*, p. 25. My translation.

⁵⁴³ “Balestrini consegue un massimo di impersonalità parlando [...] attraverso un linguaggio già parlato, ricavando cioè i propri materiali verbali dal ritaglio di contesti di altri autori. E chi invece, come Giuliani, associa spezzoni di lingua parlata o scritta parodicamente contraffatta con i prodotti di un'invenzione linguistica per quanto possibile originale”, F. Curi, *Perdita d'aureola*, p. 243. My translation.

⁵⁴⁴ “An ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”, E. Pound, ‘A Retrospect’, *Literary Essays*, p. 4.

⁵⁴⁵ Cf. T. Lisa, *Le poetiche dgll'oggetto da Luciano Anceschi ai Novissimi: Linee evolutive di un'istituzione della poesia del Novecento*.

dimension of poetic language, its rhythmic and musical aspects. The heteronomy of the “pieces of spoken or written language” is cleverly camouflaged on a formal level by the overall rhythmic composure of the verses. As used by Giuliani, the technique of linguistic collage gains its potential for shock from the contrast between the disjointed, incohesive logical level and the controlled, balanced rhythm of the verse.

Giuliani’s own formulations ‘accommodate’ various degrees of ‘reduction of the I’: “[o]bviusly, the inclination to make thoughts and the objects of experience speak is an individual act, the act of me the writer, who has no wish to conceal my subjectivity”⁵⁴⁶. For instance, the poet’s subjectivity is completely hidden in ‘Prosa’, an ‘experiment’ dedicated to and appropriating Nanni Balestrini’s poetic operation. Normally, however, Giuliani’s finds other ways to make his poetic I as objective as possible, and distance himself from any possible relapse into the snares of neo-crepuscular intimism and sentimentalism. ‘Compleanno’ (‘Birthday’), provides an example of his treatment of subjectivity also thanks to its polemic stance towards the notion of the ‘objective correlative’. The verses intermittently and rhythmically build up a lyrical I: “Lascia ch’io soffra per the la discesa / del ricco autunno [...] io verrò con la forza che crea [...] io verrò per ritagliare lo spazio / di fresche abitudini / e raccontarti il viaggio dell’insetto [...] Sempre verrò per riempire del mio cuore la spina vuota / e per risorgere.” (“Let me suffer the rich Autumn’s / descent for you [...] I will come with the creating force [...] I will come to cut out the space / of fresh habits / and tell you about the insect’s trip [...] Always will I come / to fill with my heart the empty thorn / and to rise again.”) The agency of the narrating subjectivity is reaffirmed time and again, however the ‘I’ meant as a monolithic projection coherent with the poet’s subjectivity

⁵⁴⁶ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], pp. 26-7; “[o]vviamente, l’inclinazione a far parlare i pensieri e gli oggetti dell’esperienza è un atto individuale, di me che scrivo e che non voglio affatto nascondere la mia soggettività”, ‘Introduzione’ a *I novissimi*, p. xx.

is totally absent. Instead, a series of oneiric sequences construct it as a fragmented character plunged into “shadowy dreams”, “Ah il gallo che canta dentro il sonno!” (“Ah the cock who crows in his sleep!”), suspended between hallucination and reality. The subjectivity is ‘layered’ through the succession of unrelated oneiric states of mind, dilated emotions made rhythm and raw images taking up an apparently casual dialogic form:

Quando il cuore è zoppo e la mano tormenta
la corda d’amore stretta al collo,
l’enigma del soffrire cigola in un pozzo.
Quando dici: – la mente si disfà, la vita
è triste di ciarle – è un vento in forma d’arco
tra luce e pioggia.

(‘Compleanno’)

(“When the heart is lame and the hand torments / love’s cord wrapped round the neck, /
the enigma of suffering creaks inside a well. / When you say – the mind goes to pieces,
life / is sad with prattle – it is wind bent like a bow / between light and rain.”)

The verse “the enigma of suffering creaks inside a well” is an allusion to Eugenio Montale’s ‘Cigola la carrucola nel pozzo’ (‘The Well’s pulley Creaks’)⁵⁴⁷. In Montale’s poem, the use of the “objective correlative” – a pulley creaking down a well – is used to give a detached representation of the poet’s ‘descent’ into a far away past where the image of the face of a woman, the poet’s lover, flickers in the dark. The way Montale uses the objective correlative fully respects T.S Eliot’s formulation of it as “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion”⁵⁴⁸. Within Eliot’s poetics, formal composure and artistic success can be envisaged as yet another level of emotional (or even spiritual) composure. Emotion is mastered, or better *objectified* on a formal level, through

⁵⁴⁷ E. Montale, *Ossi di seppia*.

⁵⁴⁸ T. S. Eliot, ‘Hamlet and his Problems’, *The Sacred Wood*, p. 85.

aesthetic medium and decorum: “[t]he only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’”.⁵⁴⁹ Formally successful art must express the artist’s escape from subjective emotion: the latter becomes objectively understandable only through its aesthetic necessity.

The succession of scattered images and “arruffati pensieri” (“tousled thoughts”) of ‘Compleanno’ makes the allusion to the correlative objective a polemical one. There is no use of it in Giuliani’s poems: its use would entail a subjectivity (meant as a metaphysical entity) pre-existing language and would possibly imply a falling back on to the “*I-poet*” telling us his life story. However, despite his detachment from the objective correlative, Giuliani does hold on to Eliot’s impersonality. The ‘reduction of the I’ is carried out through an ‘objective’ use of language. In ‘Compleanno’, this objectification leads to a splintered, multilayered personality constructed through a series of metaphors on the poet’s condition in contemporary society, at once Jesus Christ and captive. “L’orto sacro fu rinchiuso nella ferrea gabbia, / la lingua premuta tra un muro e una moneta” (“The holy garden was locked in an iron cage, / the tongue pressed between a wall and a coin”). The reference to Ezra Pound’s captivity in an actual steel cage in the Pisa concentration camp is presented as the legendary epitome of the condition of the poet in the world. In the poem ‘Prologo’ (‘Prologue’), the lyrical I is extinguished, or rather semantically camouflaged by the “[v]iolenza di pulcinella, disciplina da caporale” (“the violence of Pulcinella, discipline of a corporal”) that “del passo incespico fa una danza” (“creating a dance from stumbling steps”); whereas In ‘Resurrezione dopo la pioggia’ (‘Resurrection After the Rain’), it takes on the guise of an “acrobat”. Giuliani’s many poetical masks are as many profanations of both the “sublimated image of

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

the poet [and of] the enduring ideological mystification of his halo”,⁵⁵⁰ and of the social function of the *poeta vate*.

In Giuliani’s poems, the verses are rhythmic states of mind, coloured thoughts, and singable images combined together. Their succession is unpredictable and contravenes the workings of logic, the landmarks of the reader’s thoughts, as in ‘Penuria e fervore’ (‘Penury and Fervor’):

E questa è la nostra penuria nel fervore.
Le lacrime sommerse non sanno giacere
sotto la pioggia come le righe nere
del mio taccuino, come brividi che scrivo
col calamo delle ossa.

Sappiamo il segreto che tristemente spiega
la vita dell’eroe, come vediamo la luna
concitare gli squarci sereni.
Fortuna se la notte profonda il dolore
e lo restituisce al vento che langue
dietro la porta.

(This is our penury in fervor. / Hidden tears will not lie / in the rain like my notebook’s
/ black lines, like the tremors I write / with the quill in my bones. // We know the secret
sadly explained / by the hero’s life, like seeing the moon / excite a peaceful gash. /
Lucky if the night deepens pain / and returns it to the wind simpering / behind the
door.)

The verses are related by means of contiguity, at least on a logical level. Syntactic contiguity, meant as “asyntactism”, the paratactic combinations of verbal fragments coming from different contexts, is still absent from the poems of *Il cuore zoppo* (*The Lamé Heart*)

⁵⁵⁰ “immagine sublimata del poeta sia [del]la sua perdurante mistificazione ideologica dell’aureola”, F. Curi, *Perdita d’aureola*, p. xii. My translation.

collected in the *Novissimi*.

For Giuliani, ‘objectuality’ (‘oggettualità’) and impersonality are instrumental for the revitalization of the alienated subject. Tommaso Lisa points out that Giuliani’s criticism and re-elaboration of Eliot’s objective correlative gives renewed relevance to the subject but only within a perspective where the word, more than the object, redeems the subject from alienation.⁵⁵¹ The specific particularity of an event or an object is transferred on to the word: poetry’s task is to increase vitality in the sense that it must subvert and act upon “the ‘structural’ (and NOT content-related) functions of ideology”⁵⁵². The poetic operation is thus entirely internal to language, is “concrete semantics”. Poetry as a genre is characterized by the capacity to systematically subvert the relationship between ideology and language by means of its own self-reflectiveness. The subversion of the dominant ideology – “*the abuse of the habitual* (the fictitious “that’s how it is”)” – is carried out through semantic “revitalization”, i.e. through the “degree of energy it [poetry] manages to exert on socialized signs”.⁵⁵³ The linguistic energy of the poetic sign is at once socially effective energy because it changes the “vision of human relations” in a way that is objective, not confined to the private, emotional life and personal mythology of the poet.

Objectivity and impersonality are instrumental for the revitalization of the alienated subject also according to Antonio Porta whose experimentalism further emphasises the need for “*objective poets*, both in Eliot’s sense of the term, and in the sense of a constant commitment to *others* – to a *heteronomous art*”⁵⁵⁴. The poet must “plunge into reality”, or better, the selection of objects and events he makes must have that effect: “[t]he objects and

⁵⁵¹ T. Lisa, *Le poetiche dell’oggetto da Luciano Anceschi ai Novissimi: Linee evolutive di un’istituzione della poesia del Novecento*, section on Alfredo Giuliani.

⁵⁵² A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 55.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵⁵⁴ A. Porta, ‘Poetry and Poetics’, in *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 380; “*poeta-oggettivo*, sia nel senso eliotiano del termine, sia nel senso di un impegno costante verso gli *altri* per un’arte eteronoma”, ‘Poesia e Poetica’, in *I novissimi*, p. 162.

events selected and composed into one rhythmic *unicum* – these do manage to plunge us into reality”.⁵⁵⁵ Porta’s experimentalism as linguistic penetration of reality (“linguistic investigations [...] are primarily a method of penetration”)⁵⁵⁶ is predominantly a phallic urge (conversely, the poems written by the epigones of the ‘crepuscular’ poets are “flaccid forms [...] that] lack a penetrating language”.⁵⁵⁷ As pointed out by Curi, “Antonio Porta’s use of matter of his poetry is strongly conditioned by that very matter. Which is first of all erotic, obsessively perceived, frequently arousing cruelly aggressive and atrocious sadistic fantasies.”⁵⁵⁸ Porta’s early poems are matter-oriented, highly visual descriptions of animal, vegetable but also human forms of life where violence and decay slowly crawling in or apocalyptically bursting out are objectively recorded by an impassive gaze fixed on reality. The poet’s eye becomes as clinical and as meticulously objective as the dissecting gaze of the naturalist:

Il succo dalle radici striscia lentamente sù per le vene,
raggiungendo le foglie fa agitare. Con la scorza che ingrossa
cresce la polpa del legno, dilata la fibra succosa
e gli anelli che annerano e irrigiditi incrinano e un taglio
netto guizza sul tronco maturo come colpito da una scure.

‘La palepebra rovesciata’ (‘The Eyelid Inside Out’)

(The juice from the roots creeps slowly up the veins, / reaches the leaves it stirs. With
the bark thickening / the wood pulp grows, the sappy fiber expands / and the rings that
blacken and hardened crack and clean / cut springs through the mature trunk as if struck

⁵⁵⁵ A. Porta, ‘Poetry and Poetics’, in *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 379; “[g]li oggetti e gli eventi rilevati e composti in un *unicum* ritmico, riescono a calarci nella realtà”, ‘Poesia e Poetica’, in *I novissimi*, p. 161.

⁵⁵⁶ A. Porta, ‘Poetry and Poetics’, in *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 380; “[...]le ricerche di linguaggio [...]sono] soprattutto un metodo di penetrazione”, ‘Poesia e Poetica’, in *I novissimi*, p. 161.

⁵⁵⁷ A. Porta, ‘Poetry and Poetics’, in *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 378; “forme disossate [...] per] la mancanza di un linguaggio penetrante”, ‘Poesia e Poetica’, in *I novissimi*, p. 159.

⁵⁵⁸ “[l]’uso che Antonio Porta fa della materia della propria poesia è fortemente condizionato da quella materia. Che è materia soprattutto erotica, percepita in modo ossessivo, cosicchè sollecita di frequente la nascita di fantasie sadiche, crudelmente aggressive e atroci”, F. Curi, *La poesia italiana d'avanguardia*, p. 180. My translation.

by an ax.)

The influence of the *école du regard* is so strong in the early Porta as to shift the attention from the formal experimentation to the content of his highly descriptive poems. In ‘Contemplazioni’ (‘Contemplations’) there is a strong contrast between the formal elements of a closed, rhythmical language and a reality that is falling apart. The result is rather ambiguous, if not ironical: images of rotting matter are connected together and ‘encased’ by the limpid rhythm of a nursery rhyme: “La carne si conserva in scatola. / Filacciosa galleggia nella scatola // e i polipi che sfaldano il coltello / ruotano con misura in un macello // ristretto, rigurgito ribollente, / a pezzi si incagliano nel dente / [...] / la carne marcisce in scatola, / vomito spalmato da una spatola // contro uno stomaco insanguinato” (“Meat is conserved in a tin. / Stringy meat floats in the tin // and the knife the octopi trite / rotate precisely in a tight // slaughterhouse, boiling backwash, // stuck on the teeth like goulash. / [...] / the meat rots in the tin, / vomit with a shovel thinned // across a bloody stomach.”)

Blood, cuts, violent manipulation of living matter on the verge of destruction and decomposition, the cycle of biological degeneration – according to Muzzioli, the pullulation of vegetables and animals is the only thread and consistent theme in all Porta’s poems – ⁵⁵⁹ would make of these scenes *granguignolesque* ‘pulp fiction’ material. In the poem ‘La pelliccia del castoro’ (‘The Beaver Skin’) the proceedings of the montage, the manipulation, cutting and piercing, take on disquietingly physical, corporeal connotations: “In gola penetra scuotendo / le anche l’animale impellicciato, / dilata la bocca dell’esofago, / lo stomaco si distende, / in attesa d’essere venduto e lavorato / come pelle per guanti” (‘The furry animal penetrates / the throat shaking the haunches, / the esophagus’ mouth dilates, / the stomach distends, waiting / to be sold and worked / as skin gloves’). Nevertheless, the uninvolved,

⁵⁵⁹ F. Muzzioli, ‘Argomenti e strutture in “Metropolis” di Antonio Porta’, p. 152.

detached and matter-of-fact gaze of the poet conveys no emotion and consequently arouses no disgust (in full accordance with Modernist aesthetics as ‘theorized’ by Stephen Daedalus: kinetic Art, an art arousing desire and loathing is *improper* Art). The attention is drawn to the formalization of those scenes: in the one just quoted three stresses structure the narrative slipping across the *enjambements* penetratingly and obsessively. Also, ‘La pelliccia del castoro’ is a succession of disconnected violent scenes, none of them long enough to build up a sort of emotional crescendo or attachment to or identification with the *object* of violence. They resemble a fast-paced series of very short (film)shots. This cinematographic formal trait deeply characterizes Porta’s poems: Fausto Curi comments that Porta’s use of montage seems to be noticeably influenced by the “processes of cinematographic representation, particularly by the technique of dissolve and double exposure, so that his poems are constituted by short series of images that, while succeeding each other without cessation, continuously disintegrate in exiguous syntagms”.⁵⁶⁰ In ‘Aprire’ (‘To open’), syntagms or shreds of images swiftly transition to yet more images and objects. These rapid visions are intermittent: the objects disappear all of a sudden only to come back unexpectedly. They are fitfully repeated and create a sort of anticipation and surprise, “like an epiphany”.⁵⁶¹

Dietro la porta nulla, dietro la tenda,
 l'impronta impressa sulla parete, sotto,
 l'auto, la finestra, dietro la tenda,
 un vento che la scuote, sul soffitto nero
 una macchia più scura, impronta della mano,
 alzandosi si è appoggiato, nulla, premendo,
 un fazzoletto di seta, il lampadario oscilla,

⁵⁶⁰ “procedimenti della rappresentazione cinematografica, in particolare le tecniche della dissolvenza e della dissolvenza incrociata, cosicché le sue poesie sono costituite da brevi serie di immagini che mentre si succedono senza sosta si frantumano di continuo in esigui sintagmi”, F. Curi, *La poesia italiana d'avanguardia*, p. 180. My translation.

⁵⁶¹ “una sorta di choc epifanico”, *ibid.* My translation.

un nodo, la luce, macchia d'inchiostro,
sul pavimento, sopra la tenda, la paglietta che raschia,
sul pavimento gocce di sudore, alzandosi,
la macchia non scompare, dietro la tenda

(Nothing behind the door, behind the curtain, / the fingerprint stuck on the wall, under it, / the car, the window, it stops, behind the curtain, / a wind that shakes it, a more obscure / stain on the black ceiling, a handprint, / he leaned on rising, nothing, pressing, / a silk handkerchief, the lamp swings, / a knot, the light, ink-spot, / on the floor, above the curtain, the scouring pad, / on the floor drops of sweat, rising, / the stain won't rub out behind the curtain)

The repeated use of the preposition 'behind' and the consistent presence of the asyndeton give the poem an obsessive fast-paced rhythm that phonetically and semantically recreates the succession of short shots. The length of the syntagms is reduced to a minimum, they are not even related sequentially: exchanging their position would not change the narrative. They are thinly cut images of reality. The *cut* is Porta's privileged cognitive *modus operandi*. The dense potentially daunting matter is finally broken down into a 'series' of objectively recorded fragments, linguistically penetrated and mastered through a succession of syntactically unrelated syntagms. The linguistic operation as *cutting* verbal material down into a 'series' becomes content too. The investigating eye is trying to master visually the scene of a murder indicated by the fragments coming up in the penultimate stanza of the poem: "the point of the blade" and "the belly open": "risposta, le chiavi tra le dita, il ventre aperto, / la mano sul ventre, trema sulle foglie, / di corsa, sulla sabbia, punta della lama, / il figlio, sotto la scrivania, dorme nella stanza" ("answer, the keys between the fingers, the belly open, / hand on the belly, trembles on the leaves, / rushing, across the sand, the point of the blade, / the son, under the desk, sleeps in the room"). More fragments pointing to a murder, "il corpo sullo scoglio" ("the body on the rock") and a stabbing, "il taglio nel ventre"

("the cut in the belly"), appear in the last verses of the poem. A second careful reading singles out the cues leading up to the final revelatory scene: the verbal fragments indicating the parts of the body of a woman:

Le calze infila, nere, e sfilà, con i denti,
la spaccata, il doppio salto, in un istante, la calza maglia,
all'indietro, capriola, poi la spaccata, i seni
premono sul pavimento, dietro i capelli, dietro la porta,
non c'è, c'è il salto all'indietro, le cuciture,
l'impronta della mano, all'indietro, sul soffitto,
la ruota, delle gambe e delle braccia, di fianco,
dei seni, gli occhi, bianchi contro il soffitto,
dietro la porta, calze di seta appese, la capriola.

'Aprire'

(she[he?] slips on the stockings, black, and slips them off, with her[his?] teeth / the splits, the double-somersault, in an instant, the tights, / backwards, caper, the splits, the breasts / press on the floor, behind the hair, behind the door, / it's not there, there's the backward somersault, the seams, / the handprint, backwards, on the ceiling, / the wheel, of legs and arms, sideways, / of breasts, the eyes, white, against the ceiling, / behind the dooor, silk stockings hanging, the caper)

The body of the woman is semantically cut into pieces – breasts, legs, arms, hair – and re-assembled into a descriptive series together with other generic objects: the wheel, the ceiling, the door, the handprint, the seams. John Picchione has pointed out that "'Aprire' displays the search for a cognitive opening of reality"⁵⁶². One should also notice, though, that this search for truth and reality appears highly genderized on a symbolic level, all the poem revolving around the blade and the cut. But it is the cognitive search as an overall methodological process that appears genderized in Porta. For Porta, the will to know reality through linguistic

⁵⁶² J. Picchione, *The New Avant-garde in Italy*, p. 132.

experimentation is the will to penetrate reality *qua* matter, to master it as the *object* of the male eye/I's knowledge. Lucia Re has justly suggested that "[d]espite its radical critique of lyrical subjectivity, Porta's text remains haunted by [...] the question of sexuality. And however divided and problematic, its subject is still unequivocally [...] male, while the object is still always female".⁵⁶³

In the poem 'Europa cavalca un toro nero' ('Europe mounts a Black Bull'), the reference to both animal life and female gender is made through the title – according to the myth, Europa was abducted and raped by Zeus in the form of a bull and together they conceived three children, King Minos among them. This time, the 'visible' *object* of the montage is not biological matter but everyday information, news stories and common places: "Un incidente, dicono, ogni ora" ("An accident, they say, every hour"); "Usa il tuo sesso, è il comando" ("Use your sex, that's an order"). A warning against the levelling threat of the *consciousness industry* opens the poem: "Attento, abitante del pianeta, / guardati! Dalle parole dei Grandi / frana di menzogne, lassù / balbettano, insegnano il vuoto. / La privata, unica voce / metti in salvo: domani sottratta ti sarà, come a molti oramai" ("Careful, people of the planet, / look out! from the words of the Great a landslide of lies, on high / they mumble, they reach the void. / Put the private, single voice / in a safe place: tomorrow it will be / taken as from many, by now"). Also in 'Europa cavalca un toro nero' – as in 'Contemplazioni' – the violence on the level of content is counterbalanced by the consistent formal organization of the verbal material. The poem is divided into ten stanzas: rhythm and meter – the three stresses at times reduced to two – are governed by the fast cinematic narrative logic. Every stanza is the formalized narration of fragments of information. For instance, the news item in stanza 7 is about a psychopath who first kills his sister and then

⁵⁶³ L. Re, 'Language, Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde', p. 161.

blows up a village:

Con le mani la sorella egli
spinge sotto il letto. Un piede
slogato dondola di fuori.
Dalla trama delle calze sale
L'azzurro dell'asfissiato. Guarda.

'Europa cavalca un toro nero'

(With his hands he jams his / sister under the bed, A foot / dislocated dangles out.

From the mesh of stockings rises / the asphyxiated azure. Look.)

Francesco Muzzioli comments that "[b]y assuming as poetical material the fragments of fast-consumption "low" culture only aiming at the consumer's ignorance, confusion and stupidity, Porta means to unveil the *false* meaning behind these words, the concatenation of all those linguistic stimuli pushing us towards not thinking."⁵⁶⁴ Poetry's task is, in Porta's own words, "deformation of information [...] necessary to get to authentic [information]"⁵⁶⁵. The task of poetry is to provide a critique of the language as used by the mass media (newspapers, television and radio) and this critique is carried out by exasperating the semantic twitches and stereotypes of mediatic language. The latter is reduced to "the stereotypical grimace of Kitsch".⁵⁶⁶ Porta's textual practice is one deploying a formal critique of the verbal cliché, linguistic forms and common places – a trait shared with all the *novissimi* poets, especially Balestrini. The *novissimi*'s critique of the verbal cliché through the montage technique is an instance of "the modernist phantasy of self-definition through opposition to a degraded mass

⁵⁶⁴ "[a]ssumendo come materiale della poesia i frammenti di quella cultura "bassa", di rapido consumo, che ha come unico scopo l'ignoranza, la confusione e la stupidità dei fruitori, Porta intende svelare il *falso* significato che vi è dietro queste parole, il concatenarsi di tutti gli stimoli linguistici che ci spingono a non pensare", F. Muzzioli, 'Argomenti e strutture in "Metropolis" di Antonio Porta', p. 148. Muzzioli also points out how this attempt at demystifying the language of the mass-media "is not dissimilar from experiments of technological poetry, i.e., Pignotti's" (*ibid.*). My translation.

⁵⁶⁵ "deformazione dell'informazione [...] necessaria per arrivare a quella [informazione] autentica", A. Porta, 'Con riferimento a "L'enigma naturale"'. I am here quoting from F. Muzzioli, 'Argomenti e strutture in "Metropolis" di Antonio Porta', p. 148. My translation.

⁵⁶⁶ "smorfia stereotipata del kitsch", *ibid.* My translation.

culture".⁵⁶⁷ Indeed, such critique is "the principle that founds the modernist ethos".⁵⁶⁸ The verbal cliché as a mass culture product is deconstructed, cut into fragments, appropriated and criticized by the *novissimo*'s textual practice. Umberto Eco describes this procedure as follows: "[...] avant-garde culture [...] appropriates kitsch styles as a reaction against the all enveloping and all pervading mass culture [...] The avant-garde takes revenge on kitsch and teaches kitsch a lesson, because the artist shows the kitsch-producer how to insert an alien style into a new context without being tasteless".⁵⁶⁹ Not to be tasteless, *non peccare di gusto*, means to comply with modernist aesthetic values, the internal necessity of the work, its formal decorum and self-referentiality. By accepting to *bricoler*, the artist tries to get out from a situation where everything seems to have already been said.⁵⁷⁰

On the one hand, the poetic operation of the early Porta is to be set apart from that of the other Novissimi because it presumes a reality pre-existing language, hence its stress on content.⁵⁷¹ And yet, the metalinguistic instance is very much present in Porta too: linguistic creation follows from impassible, detached, objective and truthful observation of both reality and of the linguistic material itself. This trait deeply characterizes Porta's experimentalism, one producing and carrying a sort of alienated observational, matter-of-fact knowledge. This gives rise to two considerations. From the point of view of the evolution of poetics, this trait re-connects Porta's poetics to the Milan Enlightenment and especially to Alessandro

⁵⁶⁷ J. Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, p. 25

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁹ "[...] la cultura di avanguardia [...] reagendo alla situazione massiccia e avvolgente della cultura di massa, prende i propri stilemi a prestito dal Kitsch [...] Vendetta dell'avanguardia sul Kitsch, e lezione dell'avanguardia al Kitsch come possa inserire uno stilema estraneo in un nuovo contesto senza peccare di gusto", U. Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*, pp. 130-1. My translation.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.* Eco is using the notion of *bricolage* in the sense Lévi-Strauss uses it in *la Pensée sauvage*.

⁵⁷¹ Porta's early stress on content is overcome and contradicted by his later collection of poems *Cara*. Francesco Muzzioli explains this evolution as follows "From science to literature, the term *experimentalism* has kept its main characteristics: openness towards the possible results, the faculty to go back after negative experiments, the capacity to operate towards different directions." F. Muzzioli, 'Argomenti e strutture in "Metropolis" di Antonio Porta', p. 147. My translation.

Manzoni's notion of artistic *creation as 'invention'*. For Manzoni to create means to invent but only literally, in the etymological sense of the word: "to invent" i.e. *invenire* means "to find".⁵⁷² To create is to find what is already there.

X. Conclusion: The Neo-avant-garde's Genderization of Culture

There is another way, that to my knowledge has never been pointed out, to explain Porta's, and the Novissimi's, claims to objectivity and impassibility, their stigmatization of the lyrical I consumed by his emotions, their loathing for the Neo-Crepuscular poet's "intimism" and their almost super-human, in a Nietzschean sense, rhetorical construction of "experimentalism" as a "vocation to know" as opposed to both emotion and 'piety'. According to Alfredo Giuliani: "each of us has cultivated, without pieties, his own capacity for contact with the linguistic forms of reality".⁵⁷³ The Novissimi's construction of experimentalism is based on and is an expression of a strict and systematic genderization of culture. Here is a lengthy excerpt from Giuliani's 1965 introduction to *I novissimi* giving the reasons for the neo-avant-garde's stigmatization of the neo-crepuscular poet:

"The Neo-Crepuscular poet writer was obsessed by the desire to be in the Opposition and yet remain within History, and wanted poetry delicate and internal, to take an outward, "popular" turn; he was dogged, stifling, and verbose. Projecting his emotional conflicts and his subdued if not depressed mythologies onto a largely journalistic problematic, mounting his lyricism on the support of subjects taken from the culture's raw "current events," he would seize on the most spurious forms of sociology and journalism, and almost invariably end up (with the exception of a few authentic moments of rage) on the dreary, plangent note of autobiography. What he did however

⁵⁷² "Inventor comes from *Inventum* or [...] *Invenire*. If you expressly mean that the artist finds, well that makes me happy, because there is the necessary underlying assumption that the object was before he covered it with his operation." A. Manzoni, 'Dialogo dell'invenzione', *Opere*. My translation.

⁵⁷³ A. Giuliani, 'Introduction' to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], p. 20; "ognuno ha coltivato senza pietismi la propria capacità di contatto con le forme linguistiche della realtà", 'Introduzione' a *I novissimi*, p. xiv.

excel at was describing the suburban landscape in which he lived, the winters of his own heart, the buses he would board in the morning, the *mamma* who dusts off his desk for him; whereas he was more reticent and modest about his actual economic and sexual experiences (about which he might really have had nothing to say). His poetics, linked to the conventional notion of “content” as a sum of thoughts, visions, and feelings of intrinsic value [...].⁵⁷⁴

The personality of the neo-crepuscular poet is constructed through a series of feminine stereotypical attributes (nouns or adjectives: “internal”, “emotional” “depressed” “plangent” “heart” “feelings”). His staying with his “*mamma*”, his reticence and modesty “about his actual economic and sexual experience (about which he might really have had nothing to say)” are the ultimate traits of his demasculinization. The latter finds its most appropriate cultural expression in “popular” “journalistic” genres, “spurious forms of sociology and journalism”, autobiographical “lyricism”, all those content-oriented popular forms *not* focused on highly valued Modernist principles such as innovation; also in a scientific sense and thus connected to objectivity and impersonal observation, formal research as elaboration of the medium itself, in short, all those works that are not “self-referential, self-conscious, frequently ironic, ambiguous and rigorously experimental.”⁵⁷⁵ On the other hand, the poetry produced by the novissimo poet is “action poetry” (Sanguineti): it leads to action. Such “poetry is what it does” (Giuliani), is “objective”, it “penetrates reality”, is “vitalistic” and “innovative”. The same binary opposition (Male *equals* Modernist High Art vs Female *equals* Popular Entertainment Culture) is at work in the neo-avant-garde’s infamous choral definition of Cassola, Bassani and other authors of quality entertainment novels and neo-realistic novels as “Liale del ‘63”⁵⁷⁶ ‘Lialas of 1963’, Liala (Liana Negretti) being a very well

⁵⁷⁴ A. Giuliani, ‘Introduction’ to *I Novissimi* [Eng.], pp. 44-5.

⁵⁷⁵ A. Huyssen, *After the great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, p. 53.

⁵⁷⁶ N. Ajello, *Lo scrittore e il potere*, p. 161. See also L. Re, *Language, Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde*.

known and prolific Italian female writer of *romanzi rosa* (romantic novels) of the time. The novissimi participate in the Modernist genderization of culture based on the identification of mass culture (newspapers, entertainment novels, outmoded literature, cinema) with the woman. Andreas Huyssen explains this Modernist binary organization of culture as follows: “woman [...] is positioned as reader [and producer] of inferior literature – subjective, emotional and passive – while man [...] emerges as a writer of genuine, authentic literature – objective, ironic, and in control of his aesthetic means.”⁵⁷⁷ The problem is not the desire to make a *distinction* between forms of ‘high’ and new art and forms of ‘mass’ culture (or former innovative ‘high art’ now old and outmoded): “[t]he problem is rather the persistent gendering as feminine of what is devalued.”⁵⁷⁸

As a move, the neo-avant-garde’s genderization of culture can count on a variety of antecedents within both Modernism and the historical avant-garde. For Tristan Tzara, emasculation produces comprehensible works, hence his recipe for a dadaist poem, itself a vital and spontaneous rejection of content-oriented readers and writers, i.e. “children, humanity, kind bourgeois and journalist virgins [...] an intelligible work is the product of a journalist”.⁵⁷⁹ The female genderization of the devalued is at work also in F.T. Marinetti’s manifesto where the Art institution is seen as an emblem of female cultural cowardice: “We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice.”⁵⁸⁰ For Breton, poetry is born out of the artist slashing (in both senses, cutting and criticizing) the work journalists write for the masses: “It is even permissible to entitle POEM what we get from the most random assemblage possible

⁵⁷⁷ A. Huyssen, *After the great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, p. 46.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵⁷⁹ T. Tzara, ‘Dada Manifesto 1918’, pp. 79-80.

⁵⁸⁰ F. T. Marinetti, ‘The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism 1909’, in U. Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 20.

(observe, if you will, the syntax) of headlines and scraps of headlines cut out of the newspapers".⁵⁸¹ The dismembering of the newspapers as daily matter is an act of both irony and mental superiority. The Futurist's 'physical' superiority becomes mental superiority in Surrealism: Breton's definition of Surrealism being "Psychic automatism in its pure state". Its aim is to express "the actual functioning of thought", "the disinterested play of thought" but also of dreams as they both belong to "a 'superior reality'".⁵⁸² As pointed out by Roman Jakobson, "Mallarmé disait aussi qu'il servait au bourgeois les mots que celui-ci lit tous les jours dans son journal mais qu'il les servait dans une combinaison déroutante."⁵⁸³ In F. W. Nietzsche's *Will to Power*, the hatred for the newspapers, or better, the "*vomit* *matutinus* [morning vomit] of the newspapers"⁵⁸⁴ is deprived of all irony and playfulness. Within Nietzsche's philosophical project, the devaluation of women and newspapers seems to be organically intertwined with the systematic use of the fragment, or the aphorism, as a cognitive tool renovating philosophy as a discipline. According to Nietzsche, G. Eliot's work is the "moral scribble of [a] petty countryside woman";⁵⁸⁵ George Sand is a "big prolific cow", a Romantic "*artist* [...] aspiring to 'noble' passions, heroic attitudes through an unsettled, plebeian ambition".⁵⁸⁶ In the aphorism just quoted, it is Sand *qua* romantic artist that is to be derided and ridiculed, "like everything coming from Rousseau"⁵⁸⁷, i. e. the whole of Romanticism. Also within Nietzsche's textual practice the devalued, i. e. Romanticism, is gendered as feminine.

The aesthetic of the fragment seems inextricably bound up with the desire for a

⁵⁸¹ A. Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism', p. 41.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵⁸³ I am here quoting from N. Balestrini, *Paesaggi verbali*.

⁵⁸⁴ "*vomit* *matutinus* dei giornali", F. W. Nietzsche, *La volontà di potenza*, p. 935. My translation.

⁵⁸⁵ "scarabocchio morale di [una] donnetta di campagna, G. Eliot", *ibid.* My translation.

⁵⁸⁶ "grossa vacca prolifica", "*artista*, [...con] questa esagitata ambizione plebea per passioni 'nobili', atteggiamenti eroici", *ibid.*, p. 936. My translation.

⁵⁸⁷ "come tutto quello che deriva da Rousseau", *ibid.* My translation.

formal mastering, through cut and physical manipulation followed by intellectual distancing from, of the matter and body of inferior cultural forms: daily information, content-oriented, demoded and 'low' forms of literature, physical matter as opposed to 'intellect', 'thought' (our task "is to make thoughts as visible as objects", Giuliani) and 'objectivity'. When confronted with the tradition of the fragment, the Novissimi's 'lowering' [abbassamento] and 'plurilingualism' [plurilinguismo] meant as drawing on common everyday language, appear as part of the Modernist/Avant-gardist legacy.

Conclusion

Besides trying to understand how the Italian neo-avant-garde ‘fit’ into the model of their historical counterpart, the critic should also try to understand how they appropriate, change and perform the notion of avant-garde as truly innovative art. The interplay between “the reduction of the I” and the technique of the montage fosters a modern parody of the Edenic condition of language, a criticism triggered by what the poet perceives as the factual massifying abuse language systematically undergoes. By *appropriating* pre-existing verbal material, he antagonistically *re-appropriates* and claims back his privileged relationship with language, his ‘craftsmanship’ and his chosen status in society. The operation is at once metalinguistic and ideological: the clarity and communicativeness of language, its social function as a medium, is reduced to a minimum obscured as it is by the ‘formalizing’ and ‘re-structuring’ process. Form becomes the new content of the work: hence Giuliani's “neocontenutismo”. Despite being self-referential and metalinguistic, the operation is not an end in itself: the new “structures [will] appear as the epistemological metaphors, structural resolutions of a shared theoretical consciousness”⁵⁸⁸ which becomes perceivable and knowable *through* physical form. The latter becomes the physical *medium* of the poet's revolutionizing attitude and theoretical consciousness. By creating a new “perception model”, the new structure conjured up by the poetic operation produces a new vision of the world in the reader. The poetic operation formalizes the poet's antagonistic relationship towards the means of mass communication by means of the institution of a new structure – new code or new system of signification. This leads us back to a semiotic understanding of neo-avant-

⁵⁸⁸ “strutture che appaiono come *metafore epistemologiche*, risoluzioni strutturali di una diffusa coscienza teorica”, U. Eco, *Opera aperta*, p. 159. My translation.

garde art as suggested by Corti: the discontinuity of the imaginative process, asyntactism, fracturing of the verbal continuum, and the schizomorphic reconstitution of the fragments by contiguity, creates a new code while acting as a “vaccine against other preponderant linguistic codes”.⁵⁸⁹

The rather unqualified notion of 'formal novelty' acquires a new precise meaning within a semiotic perspective: formal novelty becomes the creation of a 'new code'. To understand this, Eco's considerations on artistic invention are of great relevance. The creation of a new code is a revolution in the production of signs, a 'revolution' in the proper scientific meaning of the term. Within a semiotic perspective an “INVENTION [is] a mode of production in which the producer of the signic function chooses a new material continuum that has not been segmented yet to fulfill the aim he has in mind”.⁵⁹⁰ Invention (segmentation of material, new arrangement of segments, ensuing creation of new and original content) is creativity at its highest because it institutes a new code by inventing both form and content. By introducing them in his own culture, the artist creates a new way of 'seeing' the world where, as Teresa de Lauretis has pointed out, 'to see' crucially involves both “theoretical consciousness” (knowledge) and “physical continuum” (perception). Teresa de Lauretis sums up the process of the creation of a new code as follows:

"the institution of a code is that process in signic production where non-physical reality (the content of a perceptive and/or emotional experience) is transformed in expression by operating on a physical continuum. The process starts from a perceptive model, goes on to a semantic model to proceed from the latter on to expression. The

⁵⁸⁹ “vaccino contro i codici linguistici preponderanti”, M. Corti, *Il viaggio testuale*, p. 126. My translation.

⁵⁹⁰ “INVENZIONE [è] un modo di produzione in cui il produttore della funzione segnica sceglie un nuovo continuum materiale non ancora segmentato ai fini che si propone”, U. Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale*, p. 309 (quoted from Teresa de Lauretis, *Umberto Eco*, p. 58). My translation. Cf. U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* p. 252 (although the English version is rather a re-thinking and re-writing of the original *Trattato* than an actual translation).

perception model as a "dense" (unarticulated) representation of a given experience leads to a semantic model retaining only some of the features of the dense representation, so the semantic model is then transformed in expression. This is so for the sender [creator]; the process is reversed for the receiver [beholder]" ⁵⁹¹.

The creation of a new perception model is the ultimate end of the creative process. There are two points that have to be stressed. The first one regards the semiotic model's challenge of the notion of 'neutralization'. The latter loses its derogatory connotations to become a somewhat dynamic moment playing a substantial role within the overall creative process, the result of the hegemonic status of the new code within a wider culture. Acceptance of the new code is instrumental for its actual efficacy: "when the new code is accepted, then a new form of perception is instituted within a given culture, a new perception model"⁵⁹². (p. 59)

The second point regards the fundamental prerequisite of the semiotic notion of "Invention": the presence of a *theoretical awareness* or consciousness informing a *physical continuum*. The preferential relationship with language of the Novissimo poet is not spontaneous and 'intuitive': on the contrary it is privileged because it is supported by his humanistic culture as a man of letters, a "shared theoretical consciousness" based on knowledge of "works on philosophy, ethnology, cultural anthropology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, semiotics and even physics and economy [and of authors like] Marx, Freud, Jung, Saussure, Gramsci, Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Lévy-Strauss, Foucault, Althusser,

⁵⁹¹ "l'istituzione di codice è un processo di produzione segnica in cui una realtà non fisica (il contenuto di una esperienza percettiva e/o emotiva) viene trasformata in espressione operando su un continuum fisico. Il processo va da un modello percettivo a un modello semantico e da questo all'espressione. Il modello percettivo come rappresentazione "densa" (non articolata) della particolare esperienza dà origine a un modello semantico che conserva solo alcune delle proprietà della rappresentazione densa e poi il modello semantico viene trasformato in espressione. Questo per il "mittente"; per il destinatario il processo è rovesciato", T. de Lauretis, *Umberto Eco*, pp. 58-59. My translation.

⁵⁹² "quando il nuovo codice è accettato, ecco che si istituisce nella cultura una nuova forma della percezione, un nuovo modello percettivo", *ibid.*, p. 59. My translation.

Derrida.”⁵⁹³ The ‘cultural capital’ behind the *techne* of the *novissimi* is as important as the *techne* itself. It goes without saying that the *novissimi*’s poetic operation implies much more ‘cultural capital’ – both at the moment of creation and at the moment of reception – than concrete, visual and technological poetry. This is their ‘distinction mark’ when related to other neo-avant-gardes producing concrete and visual poetry.

As opposed to their French counterpart, *Tel Quel*, feminism is not part of the neo-avant-garde’s overall cultural project. Lucia Re argues that the fact that the Italian neo-avant-garde “gained and maintained a group identity in part through the exclusion or marginalization of women”⁵⁹⁴ does not necessarily entail an unbridgeable incompatibility with the women’s movement. To the contrary, according to Re, one could maintain that the neo-avant-garde’s systematic problematization of the linguistic and political unconscious of dominant bourgeois culture, their ‘reduction’ of the writer’s subjectivity and their “position on language in particular prefigured and informed that of the Italian women’s movement, whose critique of authority addressed first and foremost the realm of culture and the hegemonic use of language itself”.⁵⁹⁵ The motivation and plausibility of such a position seems to stem from a Kristevan understanding of the deep correspondences between the marginal oppositionality of modernist subjectivity on the one side and, on the other, female subjectivity’s negotiation of a counter-position in regard to hegemonic discursive practices. Both subjectivities are here envisaged as ‘in process’, anti-monological and anti-normative with regard to the literary norm and the social one. However, the last chapter of the present work has pointed out that the rhetorical construction of experimentalism is based on and is an expression of a strict and

⁵⁹³ “opere di filosofia, di etnologia, di antropologia culturale, di psicoanalisi, di linguistica, di semiotica e perfino di fisica e di economia [e di] Marx, Freud, Jung, Saussure, Gramsci, Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Althusser, Derrida”, F. Curi, *La poesia italiana d’avanguardia*, p. 157. My translation.

⁵⁹⁴ L. Re, ‘Language, Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde’, p. 167.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

systematic genderization of culture. In other words, it seems that the critic has to take into account two diverging tensions: on the one hand, the *novissimi's* 'reduction of the I' is a potentially emancipatory phenomenological problematization of the relationship between subject and linguistic act because it denounces the metaphysical autonomy of the subject as a sheer illusion. And yet, on the other, there is a strong gender bias at work exactly on the level of the subjectivity presiding over 'experimentalism' as a cognitive endeavour and a linguistic literary process. The degree of the presence of those two opposite tensions varies enormously in the *novissimi's* works. For instance, the latter tension is stronger in Porta's poems as the subjectivity at the core of his textual practice restates the dichotomic relationship between subject (i. e. the enquiring male gaze) and object (i. e. what is acted upon, nature and popular culture). Conversely, in Balestrini's poems, the 'reduction of the I' is carried out so systematically and recklessly as to bring the metaphysical subject of the linguistic act (and the notion of male firstness presumed by it) to a radical dissolution. Balestrini's poetry abolishes the identity of the subject of the enunciation together with the issue of gender - which is itself a corollary of the notion of identity.⁵⁹⁶ This is true also for Sanguineti's *Laborintus*.

In the present work, we have analysed the Italian neo-avant-garde's 'reduction of the I' and envisaged it as the process of self-objectification of the author, i. e. the formal treatment the writer's subjectivity undergoes in order to become style (Umberto Eco). The author's feelings and personal experience are no longer the 'content' of the work as they are replaced by an objectified (formalised) subjectivity. *Style* is the new content of the work (Alfredo Giuliani), and expresses the latter's vision of the world, a vision that is self-reliant and

⁵⁹⁶ I explore this issue in my 'Travestitismo d'avanguardia' where I give a Kristevan reading of Nanni Balestrini's *Le avventure complete della signorina Richmond*. To apply a Kristevan approach to *poesia novissima* as an overall phenomenon becomes highly problematic.

depends on nothing external to the work itself. The author's self-objectification is directed towards the inner world of emotions and feelings, an imaginary side gendered as 'feminine' that is to be silenced for a new and unprecedented beauty to come into the world. This is the topos on which many strands of modernism are based: "[f]or a recurrent theme in modernist polemic - a theme given definitive form in the Futurist manifestos - would be that Woman is 'anti-modern', that the feminine denotes a particular psychological formation which is in some sense resistant to the new".⁵⁹⁷ The modernist and avant-garde artist pursues the originality myth by silencing the 'feminine': Marinetti's "scorn for women" is the precondition for the artist's successful quest of the new - a topos dominated by the 'masculine' themes of risk and self-exposure. The topos of the modernist quest of the new is rhetorically articulated by means of a systematic gendering of literary language identifying stylistic backwardness, moral and philosophical negligence with the 'feminine' and its stereotypical attributes. As we have seen, also the cognitive activism of the *novissimo* poet has strong 'masculine' connotations. The notion of 'experimentalism' and that of the 'reduction of the I' seem to be an instance of the modernist gendering of the new, a literary language expressing a deep distrust of the 'feminine' and its stereotypical attributes: the *novissimo* poet's rhetorical articulation of the 'reduction of the I' shows a deep distrust of the 'feminine' that has to be overcome (i. e. the emotional inwardness and plaintive lyricality of the *poeta crepuscolare*). We also discussed the historical interpretation Umberto Eco gives of the stage reached by contemporary art and literature: according to Eco, the aesthetic pleasure yielded by the 'open work' is "intellectual pleasure" and is the opposite of the "emotional and intuitive pleasure" characterizing the fruition of older styles and forms now obsolete. Eco characterizes what is to be overcome with stereotypical 'feminine' attributes ('emotional' and 'intuitive' as not

⁵⁹⁷ P. Nicholls, *Modernisms: A literary guide*, p. 86.

mediated by reason): his interpretation too seems to be an instance of the gender paradigms at work in the modernist search of the new. This gendering pertains the symbolic order: on a cultural level, 'woman' and the female body provide the symbolic focus for an attack against uses of language and subjectivity that have to be overcome. The Futurists envisaged the symbolists' search for the 'rare word', their inward and introspective subjectivity as a 'feminized' literary endeavour - Marinetti's "scorn of woman" epitomizing his attacks against decadent literary topics such as romantic love and bourgeois love-triangles. Venice - the symbol of Italian backwardness and sterile past - is envisaged by Marinetti as a 'female' locus, a prostitute at the mercy of foreign tourists.⁵⁹⁸

The 'masculine' genderization of the notion of the new is a corollary of the positive value attributed to it. The point that is to be stressed - in terms of the periodization of the Italian neo-avant-garde as a late modernist cultural phenomenon - is the centrality and positive construction of the new as a notion in the first place. Its strength and centrality seem to posit the Italian neo-avant-garde within the structure of a modernist sensibility. According to Gianni Vattimo, modernism and post-modernism express diametrically opposite attitudes towards the 'new' as a category: "the post-modern characterizes itself not only as novelty with regard to the modern, but also as *dissolution of the category of the new*, as experience of the 'end of history' rather than presenting itself as a different stage, either more advanced or regressed, than history itself" (my italics).⁵⁹⁹ The present study confirms the centrality of the

⁵⁹⁸ And yet the Futurist movement included a number of women writers and hosted a lively debate on feminism. Cf. C. Salaris, *Le futuriste*; M. Bentivoglio and F. Zoccoli, *Futuriste italiane nelle arti visive*, G. Carpi, *Futuriste. Letteratura. Arte. Vita*.

⁵⁹⁹ "il post-moderno si caratterizza non solo come novità rispetto al moderno, ma anche come dissoluzione della categoria del nuovo, come esperienza di 'fine della storia', piuttosto che come presentarsi di uno stato diverso, più progredito o più regredito, non importa, della storia stessa". G. Vattimo, *La fine della modernità. Nichilismo ed ermeneutica nella cultura post-moderna*, p. 12. My translation.

notion of the new for an assessment of the Italian neo-avant-garde.⁶⁰⁰ For the literary critic to single out only one specific category - the new - representing modernism as a whole posits certain problems though. Within the Anglophone academia, it has now become customary to acknowledge a variety of *modernisms* - which makes clear-cut and straightforward periodizations increasingly problematic. For instance, the cult of the new, *modernolatria*, or the simple idea of the unquestionable linearity of temporal advancement is not a value informing the works of James Joyce or T. S. Eliot (although 'objectivity' meant as aesthetic distance does): *Finnegans Wake* presents a circular and cyclical structure entrenched in Vichian myth where history and individual lives reiterate the same patterns and archetypes; the time of *The Four Quartets* is cyclical too, an endless round of growth and decay. The 'circular' archetypal time of these two works seems to question from within the modernist literary canon both the absolute value of the new and the ideal of progress informing western society's notion of modernity.

The present study has argued the positive centrality of the notion of the new by positing it within other complex dynamics informing the neo-avant-garde's overall cognitive disposition, a disposition presenting the following modernist traits: the male genderization of the valued (the new as a masculine construction, the experimental male gaze), the female genderization of the devalued (older literary forms and popular forms of culture, like the newspaper, envisaged as woman), the myth of objectivity (simultaneity, multisided vision of phenomena, reliance upon scientific knowledge, re-enactment of scientific paradigms) and the systematic use of the fragment (montage and collage technique). For the periodization of the neo-avant-garde, the present work has taken into consideration these different factors

⁶⁰⁰ Despite bringing to a conclusion that is opposite to ours, such centrality has also been stressed by Monica Jansen. And yet, according to Jansen, the neo-avant-garde carries out "un ripensamento del valore assoluto del nuovo" and is thus closer to a post-modernist position. M. Jansen, *Il dibattito sul postmoderno in Italia. In bilico tra dialettica e ambiguità*, p. 150.

because, far from being a monolithic phenomenon, modernism has actually produced a wealth of diverging and contradictory literary and artistic experiments.

After raging for two decades or so, the debate on post-modernism has reached a downward fase. To invoke the 'categories' of the post-modern for an understanding of the Italian neo-avant-garde seems to be a rearguard literary battle rendered *passé* not least by the systematic questioning of the myth of a monolithic modernism - a myth upon which the possible idea of a literary *post* necessarily relies. While respecting the lively and complex debate on the post-modernism of the neo-avant-garde, the present study hopes to have satisfactorily shown some methodological caveats cautioning against the process of oversimplification at work in the periodizing operation itself.

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